

Author
Hiiro Shimotsuki

Illustrator
Takashi Iwasaki

vol.4

Thank you
for your
purchase!

PEDDLER IN ANOTHER WORLD

**I CAN GO BACK TO MY WORLD
WHENEVER I WANT!**



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Summary of the Previous Volume

I, Shiro Amata, had been happily enjoying my new life as a peddler in the world of Ruffaltio, when one fateful evening, the grandmother I'd thought was dead appeared in front of me, looking about sixty years younger than in her memorial photo.

"Hey there, Shiro. It's been a while."

After this reunion that was more confusing than emotional, grandma came back with me to her house in Japan for the first time in seven years, and subsequently spent day after day visiting sights around Tokyo.

I, on the other hand, spent several weeks over in Ruffaltio, traveling with Karen and Aina to Mazela, the feudal capital of the region Ninoritch was in. On learning about the city's all-important bathing culture, I decided to pursue a new business opportunity that had opened up to me—namely, selling soap and shampoo while I was in the capital to hopefully earn some big bucks. So once we got to Mazela, I joined the Eternal Promise merchant guild, became good friends with its guildmaster, Zidan, and just as I'd anticipated, went on to make a killing selling soap and shampoo sets. After a few extremely productive days, Karen, Aina, and I headed back to Ninoritch, and I was finally able to return home for the first time in several weeks. Then, one afternoon, while grandma and I were eating lunch, the doorbell rang.

"Hey! Come out, come out, big bro!"

"Open the door, bro-bro!"

Well, would you look at that? My high school-aged twin sisters, Shiori and Saori, had come to pay me a visit, and what's more, they'd decided—without even thinking to ask for my permission—to stay at my place for a few days while they went to open house events at universities around Tokyo. I started panicking (I mean, what if they learned the pretty girl staying with me was actually our *grandma*?!), but grandma seemed happy about the prospect of spending time with her granddaughters. As I didn't really have a whole lot of

choice in the matter, I said they could stay with us for a little while, and just crossed my fingers and hoped for the best. Unfortunately, my prayers went unanswered. One day, grandma and I came home to find the twins sitting in front of the closet that led to Ruffaltio with the door wide open. I pointed the scene out to grandma, who simply smiled.

“Oh, it looks like they’ve found out about the portal!” she said in a cheerful tone.

Chapter One: The Twins Learn About the Other World

“Um, grandma?” I said, calling her into the room, then pointing at the twins who were sitting on the floor with blank looks on their faces in front of the open closet door. Grandma came into the room, took one look at the scene, and grinned.

“Oh, it looks like they’ve found out about the portal!” she said in a cheerful tone.

I was so taken aback by her reaction, I started flailing my arms around. “Why do you look so *pleased* about it?!” I exploded.

“Why shouldn’t I?” she said innocently.

“You...” I uttered, before grabbing her by the hand and dragging her into the hallway. “Come with me!” Even though the twins were seemingly frozen in shock, this conversation probably wasn’t one we should be having in front of them.

Once out of the room, I brought my mouth up to grandma’s ear and whispered, “Grandma, Shiori and Saori know about the closet now. They know it leads to another world. Do you understand what that means?”

“Yup,” she said simply. “What’s the big deal?”

“What kind of reaction is *that*?!” I whisper-shouted in response. “What’s the *big deal*? Well, what if they say they wanna go over there? What will you do then?!”

“I’ll tell them to go,” grandma said with a smile. “They’re my darling granddaughters, after all. Just like you’re my darling grandson. If they wish to visit Ruffaltio, I’ll give them my blessing.”

“But they’re still in high school!” I protested.

“There are many countries in Ruffaltio where the age of majority is fifteen,

you know,” grandma told me. “And here in Japan, back in the olden days, even young children could take part in a coming-of-age ceremony and be treated as adults if their family deemed they were ready for that responsibility, right?”

“That’s true,” I conceded, “but I’d like to point out that we’re living in the 21st century, not the 12th!”

“Ah, but when you get to my age, what’s a mere thousand years?” she said with a shrug.

“Well, to us mere mortals, a thousand years is rather a long time!”

While grandma and I were in the middle of our heated discussion, the twins suddenly came out of the room and into the hallway. *Aw, crap*, I thought. I’d just realized that I’d been unconsciously raising my voice this entire time. Had they overheard our conversation?

“H-Hey, you two...” I greeted them, but they simply walked past me like I wasn’t even there. I watched on in shock as they padded downstairs without even glancing at the two of us once. “Maybe they’re thirsty?” I suggested.

Grandma shrugged. “Maybe.”

“Or maybe...” I began, but paused as I was suddenly hit by a realization. “Ah, I know what’s up. They think they’re dreaming right now, just like I did when I first discovered the closet.”

“What do you mean?” grandma asked.

It was my turn to shrug. “What I said. When I opened that closet for the first time and saw a forest on the other side of the door, I figured I must be hallucinating due to stress and exhaustion. To be honest with you, I even started wondering if there was something wrong with me.”

After all, it wouldn’t have been too much of a surprise if I *had* started developing mental health issues at the time. I’d felt completely run-down and stressed beyond belief due to the toll my previous job had taken on me, as well as all the other issues I’d found myself having to deal with, so when I opened that closet door and saw a forest beyond it, I couldn’t help thinking it must be some sort of hallucination. Even months later, I could still taste the coffee I’d sipped in an effort to snap myself out of it. Though, of course, in the end, it

turned out not to be a hallucination at all.

“I bet the twins are thinking the same thing,” I continued. “They probably went downstairs to brew themselves some tea to calm down or something.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” grandma said skeptically. “To me, it looked more like they were about to head out somewhere.”

“Head out?”

“Yup. Head out.”

Sure enough, the pair trotted back upstairs with their sneakers in their hands not long after.

“W-W-Wait a second, grandma! They’re *actually* going over there! *Look* at them! They don’t even seem the least bit hesitant about doing so!” I blurted out, starting to panic.

“That’s my granddaughters for you!” grandma declared proudly.

“What are you looking all *happy* for?!” I berated her.

“What do you mean? Aren’t I allowed to be proud of my courageous little girls?”

“That’s not the issue! There are monsters in Ruffaltio, remember? What if—” I started to explain, but grandma interrupted me by raising a hand.

“Hold on a second.”

“What is it? We don’t exactly have time to waste right now, grandma!”

“Oh, shush. We can have this conversation later. Besides...” she trailed off.

“Besides?” I prompted.

She extended a finger toward the room with her memorial altar in it. “I’m pretty sure the twins are about to step into Ruffaltio.”

“*What?!?*” I cried.

I automatically turned and peered into the room, and sure enough, Shiori and Saori were standing right in front of the open closet with their sneakers now on their feet and resolute looks on their faces. They exchanged a look, then

wordlessly clasped hands and stepped toward the closet.

“Hold it!” I called out in an attempt to stop them, but I knew that wouldn’t do it, so I rushed into the room and grabbed them by the shoulders. They jumped out of their skins and spun around to face me.

“Oh, it’s you, bro,” Saori said, with her usual sullen look on her face. “When did you get home?”

“Quite a while ago, actually!”

“Oh, really?” Shiori said. “Then welcome home, bro-bro! I didn’t even realize you were back!”

“Yeah, I noticed,” I said with a sigh.

The twins had been so mesmerized by what they’d seen on the other side of the closet door, they hadn’t heard grandma and I come in, and even when they’d walked straight past us, they hadn’t noticed our presence.

“Anyway, why have you two got your shoes on in the house?” I asked.

“Take a look at this, bro! There’s a forest on the other side of the closet! Look, look!” Saori said, urging me to go check out what they had discovered by gesturing energetically toward the open closet door.

So I did as I was told, and I was greeted by familiar scenery beyond the open door to the closet. In fact, it seemed to be the exact spot in the forest I had glimpsed when I’d first slid back that door. Yup, you heard right. It led to the *forest*.

“Wait, the forest?” I mumbled to myself without thinking.

“Yeah, it’s a forest!” Saori said excitedly, seemingly not noticing that I’d used the definite article. “Did you know about this?”

I made a noise that indicated I was deep in thought. This made zero sense. The last time I’d “logged out” of Ruffaltio, I’d been in the break room on the second floor of my shop, so logically, the door should’ve led back there, shouldn’t it?

“A-ha! Judging from your expression, you had no idea about this!” Saori declared triumphantly, thinking she could read me like a book, when in reality,

she couldn't have been further from the truth. I knew I probably should have corrected her in that moment, and told her that I did, in fact, know about the closet, but I decided I'd put that on the back burner for the time being. In truth, at that particular moment in time, I was more concerned about the operation of the portal itself.

"So instead of leading to my shop, it opened out onto the forest?" I mumbled to myself, deep in thought. "Strange..."

After a few seconds of pondering, I raised my hand and pointed to grandma's memorial altar.

"Shiori, Saori, look at that," I said to the twins.

"Look at what?" Saori asked.

"That."

"The memorial altar?" Shiori said, tilting her head to one side in confusion before she and her sister went over and inspected it to see what had caught my attention.

Great. I'd successfully managed to divert their focus away from the closet for long enough to try something. I quickly closed the closet door, then slid it open again, and this time, the break room in my shop was on the other side, like it should have been the first time.

"Ah, okay. I get it now," I muttered to no one in particular before sliding the door shut again.

"Bro, what is it you wanted us to look at?" Saori asked, growing impatient as she scanned the memorial altar for anything out of place.

"Oh, I thought maybe you wanted to see grandma throwing double peace signs in her picture," I lied.

"Why would we? She did that in all her pictures. I'm tired of seeing those peace signs," Shiori pouted.

"Oh, yeah, you're right. My bad."

"Anyway, bro-bro, *this* is more important," she said, sliding the closet door open again.

This time, it led to the forest. It seemed that where the closet door led depended on the person opening it, almost like a save point or an Adventure Log in an RPG. It also meant the portal considered Ruffaltio's "starting point" to be this specific forest, almost as if to say: "Look at this grand adventure that's awaiting you!"

"Anyway, if bro didn't know about it..." Saori started.

"That means this portal thingy probably only appeared today!" Shiori declared. The two of them broke out into triumphant smiles.

Oh, boy. The two of them were jumping from one misunderstanding to the next in record time. It was bad enough trying to deal with just one of the twins, but when they got together, you basically had no chance of dissuading them from doing anything they got into their heads. As their brother—and more importantly, as the Amata family's firstborn—I knew I had to explain the situation to them, but I didn't really know where to start. Though I barely had time to worry about it before Saori piped up again.

"Ready, Shiorin?"

"Yup! Ready, Saorin?"

Saori nodded in response, then in unison, they said, "Time to journey to another world! Let's go!"

"Why did it have to come to this?" I lamented, but my words didn't reach them, because they'd already stepped through the portal. I stood there for a couple of seconds, scratching my head in frustration. "Ah, screw this! Grandma, I'm going after them!" I declared in desperation.

"Okay, dearie. Have fun!" she said, casually waving me off.

"Fun? *Fun*?! I'm not going there to have *fun*! These two are gonna drive me up the wall, I swear," I grumbled.

Grandma actually had the audacity to chuckle at that. "Well, in that case, I'll have fun in your stead."

"Ah, for the love of criminy, these brats..." I fumed. "Anyway, we'll probably be home pretty late, so go on and have dinner without us."

“Oh, don’t you worry about that. I’ll cast a time-freezing spell on the dumplings so they’ll still be nice and hot when the three of you get back,” grandma assured me.

“Thanks. I’m heading out now!”

I took out the special Ruffaltio shoes I kept hidden on a shelf in grandma’s memorial altar and hurriedly put them on.

“Be careful out there,” grandma said.

“Wait, *you’re* telling *me* to be careful? Talk about the pot calling the kettle black,” I scoffed. “Anyway, see ya!”

I passed through the portal into the forest and set off as fast as I could after my little sisters.

Chapter Two: Running After the Twins

I ended up finding them a little farther down the track.

“Wow! So *this* is what this other world looks like!” Saori exclaimed.

“It’s so cool,” Shiori said, looking awestruck.

The two of them had ventured into Ruffaltio with just the clothes on their backs and without making any other preparations whatsoever. They were strolling through the forest at a leisurely pace and looking around like tourists on a day trip. When I finally caught up to them, I let out a long, deep sigh.

“You two really need to do something about those devil-may-care attitudes you have or you might end up running headlong into trouble one of these days,” I scolded them. They’d probably known I would run after them, as they didn’t seem the least bit fazed when I suddenly came up behind them and started talking. They turned around and started laughing.

“You’re such a scaredy-cat, bro!” Saori teased.

“I am *not*!” I protested. “I’m just cautious, that’s all.”

“Oh, *really*?” Shiori asked, a mocking smile spreading across her face.

“Y-Yes, really, Shiori-chan.”

The twins simply stared at me knowingly without uttering a word.

“Don’t look at me like that. At least say *something*,” I pouted. “Anyway, I’m telling the truth! I’m not scared. I’m just the cautious type.”

“Whatever you say,” Shiori chirped in a singsong voice. It was clear she didn’t believe me in the slightest.

“Anyway, bro-bro, where’s Alice-san?”

“Gra—I mean, Alice-san said she’d wait for us at home,” I said.

“Did she? Hm, that’s probably a good thing, actually. I would’ve felt kinda bad if she’d felt forced to join us on our little family outing,” Saori said.

“Besides, someone needed to stay home to call the police in case you don’t make it back, bro-bro,” Shiori added. “And Alice-san’s an adult, so we can trust her with that!”

“Shiori-chan...” I said slowly. “Why would I be the only one not making it home in that scenario?”

“Tee hee!” she tittered, putting her fist against her head and sticking out her tongue like a child who’d just gotten caught pulling a prank.

“What do you mean, ‘tee hee’?” I said, frowning. “Anyway, now that we’re here, I guess we might as well take a look around. You two had better stick by my side. No running off at any point, you hear? We don’t know what might jump out at us in this forest.”

“Kay!” the twins said in unison.

And so, the Amata siblings ambled off deeper into the forest with me taking the lead so that the twins could hide behind me if anything happened.



A short while later, Saori stopped walking and peered at something on the horizon.

“Hey, is that...” she started, then all of a sudden, she shook her sister by the shoulder and exclaimed, “Oh! Shiorin, look!”

Shiori mumbled a confused “Hm?” as she tried to figure out what she was meant to be looking at.

“Over there! Look! There’s a town!”

“Oh, hey, you’re right!” Shiori said, finally spotting what her sister had seen.

My little sister was, of course, pointing to Ninoritch. The setting sun was bathing the little town in a soft orange glow, and from where we were standing, it really looked like something straight out of a fantasy movie. The first time I’d come to Ruffaltio, I’d also spotted Ninoritch and decided to head in that direction, hadn’t I?

“Should we go there?” Saori asked excitedly.

“Yeah!” Shiori replied, nodding.

“Hm, in that case, we’ll need...” Saori trailed off.

Shiori tilted her head to one side in confusion. “What do we need?”

Saori clenched her fist in a sign of determination. “Money, of course!” she exclaimed.

I was so taken aback by this statement, I almost tripped over my own feet. Her mind was already on money even though we hadn’t made it to the town yet. It was enough to take even me—an actual *businessman*—by surprise. Though I guess maybe I shouldn’t have been too shocked by it. She *was* my little sister, after all. Like brother, like sister, and all that.

“Hey, bro!” Saori said, pointing at me. “We need to find something we can sell in that town, so help us look for stuff!”

“Something we can sell?” I repeated, dumbfounded.

“Well, *duh*! We wanna go over there, right?” she said, pointing to Ninoritch again. “But if we turn up without any money, we won’t be able to do *anything*! So we need to find something valuable around here that we can take to that town and exchange for money! Or to put it another way: so we can sell it! For money!” she exclaimed, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

She crouched down and started pulling up some grass. “Hey, Shiorin, what do you think of this? Doesn’t it look like the kind of medicinal herbs you see in video games?” she asked her sister.

“Just looks like weeds to me,” Shiori said with a shrug.

“Hm, you think?” Saori said with a frown before looking around again. “Oh, hey, what about these pink mushrooms?”

“They’re nice and colorful. I think we might find some people who want to buy them just ‘cause they’re cute,” Shiori said, nodding sagely.

“I know, right?” Saori agreed. “I’m gonna grab a few!”

“I’ll go gather some berries,” Shiori said, pointing to a tree nearby.

“Okay!”

I stared at them, totally appalled, as they arbitrarily gathered things from the forest around them: Saori still crouching in the grass and pulling mushrooms out of the ground, while Shiori shook a tree to get the fruit on its branches to fall. All I could do was stand there with a troubled look on my face. I had been meaning to tell them that I actually knew all about this world because I'd already come over here lots of times, but I had somehow let the opportunity slip through my fingers.

"What should I do?" I muttered to myself.

The twins seemed to be having such a good time scavenging stuff in the forest that I didn't want to put a damper on the whole thing by telling them it really wasn't necessary. Besides, they were bound to find out the bits I hadn't told them soon enough, right?

"Well, I'll just go along with whatever it is they decide to do for the time being," I declared to no one in particular.

Just as I did so, Saori called out to us from a little farther away in the undergrowth. "Bro! Shiorin! Get over here! I've just found something great!"

"What is it?" Shiori called back as she lightly jogged over to her sister. I joined the pair of them a couple of seconds later.

"We can definitely sell *this*!" Saori said proudly, showing her find to Shiori.

"Wow, it's so cool!" Shiori exclaimed.

"I know, right?"

Saori's smug smile reminded me of grandma's. When I finally came up alongside the twins, I looked down at Saori's feet to see what it was she had found.

"What the hell *is* that? A giant egg?" I asked in shock.

Yup, that's right. A huge egg was just laying there in the middle of the forest floor, and it was so big, you would need to wrap both of your arms around it if you wanted to carry it. Height-wise, it looked to be about fifty to sixty centimeters tall, making it three times as big as an ostrich egg, which are renowned for their size.

I remained silent for a moment. This was *definitely* a monster egg, wasn't it? I looked around, trying to find some sort of clue that might tell me what the hell this thing was, but there didn't seem to be any sort of nest in the vicinity, and I couldn't see or hear the mother nearby. Yet, if this egg was still in its incubation phase, I was sure the mother wouldn't want to leave it all by itself for too long. Yup, this was definitely bad news. I knew I had to intervene and stop the twins from taking the egg, but just as I opened my mouth to tell them to stop, Saori bent down and started lifting it.

"Heave-ho!" she uttered. "Whoa, this egg's heavy!"

The kid's got some strength. Though she did tell me she was the standout star on her track-and-field team, didn't she? Your bro's impressed, Saori. I was so lost in my own thoughts, I didn't notice her coming toward me.

"Ugh! Here, bro, take it!" Saori said as she literally threw the egg at me.

"Whoa! Careful!" I yelped as I caught it. I immediately felt the weight of the egg in my arms and my hips. This thing must have weighed a good twenty kilos!

Saori let out a relieved sigh. "Whew, that was heavy."

"S-Saori!" I hissed between gritted teeth.

"Hm? What's wrong, bro?" she said.

"Wh-Why in the world did you give this massive egg to *me*?" I asked.

"What are you saying? You're my big brother, aren't you? And I'm your *adorable* little sister!" she said with a massive grin as she prodded her finger into her cheek. In short, her point was that, as the older brother, I should be the one doing the heavy lifting.

"But S-Saori..." I stammered as I struggled not to drop the egg. "Y-Your bro's arms are reaching their limit..."

But she completely ignored me and turned to her sister instead. "Shiorin, isn't this egg super cool?"

"Like, actually!" her sister agreed. "We should take a selfie with it!"

"Oh em gee, we *totally* should!"

“Here, let me take it!” Shiori said, attaching her smartphone to a selfie stick she just happened to have with her.

The twins huddled up on either side of me and threw peace signs. It had been quite a while since the three of us had taken a photo together.



“Shiori-chan, my arms aren’t gonna hold out much longer...” I pleaded with my other sister.

“Hang in there, bro!” Saori encouraged me.

“Do your best, bro-bro!” Shiori added.

“Aw, damn it all!” I yelled, my words echoing around the quiet forest.



“Bro, we’re gonna leave you behind if you don’t pick up the pace!” Saori said, showing no sympathy for my plight.

We had set off in the direction of Ninoritch with me still carrying the egg. I had put on a little bit of muscle after going on a few adventures in Ruffaltio, but at the end of the day, I was still just your regular gangly Japanese man, you know? There was no way I could manage a brisk walk while carrying a twenty-kilo egg! I sneakily opened my inventory and tried to place the egg in there, but it wouldn’t let me. I discovered that the reason for this was because, aside from plants, I wasn’t allowed to store living beings in my inventory. This meant my inventory categorized this egg as “alive,” which was good news in a way, because it meant at least we knew whatever was inside the egg wasn’t dead.

I sighed deeply. My arms felt like they might drop off at any moment. If it had been me calling the shots, I would’ve just put the egg down and rolled it all the way to Ninoritch. Unfortunately, I didn’t know how solid this thing was, and doing that could end up breaking it in half, which would have really upset my little sisters, especially Saori. It might even have made her cry.

“Your bro will do his best to keep the two of you happy,” I muttered under my breath.

“Ew, bro, are you *talking* to yourself?” Saori said, shooting me a disgusted look.

“That’s super gross, bro-bro,” Shiori told me.

I have no words.

“Anyway, hurry it up, bro! I wanna get to that town!” Saori said, urging me once more to quicken the pace.

“My heart’s beating super fast,” Shiori admitted.

“Me too! It’s been a while since I was this excited!”

“Same here!”

The twins’ eyes were sparkling with joy and excitement at the idea of setting foot in a town in another world for the very first time. I hadn’t seen them this happy since the time I took them to a theme park in Chiba. How many years ago was that now? I breathed a quiet “Heave-ho!” as I adjusted my grip on the egg. We were almost there. I probably wouldn’t be able to hide the fact that I knew about this world once we actually got to Ninoritch, but until then, I wasn’t going to say anything to the twins about my previous trips here because I figured it would just spoil the mood.

“Hurry up, bro!” Saori repeated for the umpteenth time.

“I can’t go any faster!” I protested.

“Oh, but if you don’t, you’ll have to go without dinner tonight!” Shiori said with a teasing edge to her voice.

Despite the egg’s unwieldy girth and weight, I did my best to keep up with the pair as they fearlessly marched toward Ninoritch.



After what could only be described as a painful trek through the forest, the twins and I finally arrived at the entrance to the town. I put the egg on the ground and immediately sank down beside it to catch my breath.

“I’m a bit nervous,” Shiori confessed. “I hope the people here are nice.”

“Don’t worry, Shiorin. If we come across any shady characters, we can always use bro as a decoy and run away,” Saori assured her.

“Hey, yeah! Good idea!”

“Don’t go along with her stupid ideas, Shiori-chan. And Saori, what do you mean you’d use me—your loving big bro—as a decoy?” I moaned.

But the two of them ignored me completely as their full attention was on the little town in front of us. I decided to enter into the spirit of things and do

likewise, turning my head this way and that to take in the sights and sounds of Ninoritch. Out in the fields that encircled the town, a couple were tilling the soil using an ox-drawn plow. A little farther beyond, a man was loading up a cart with crops. I shifted my gaze to the town itself and saw dwarven and human children running around playing, while a lizardman was attempting to get passersby to take a look at his wares. I even spotted a handful of adventurers heading out into the forest on a quest. It all looked straight out of a fantasy movie.

“I really like the vibe in this town. It looks ever so peaceful!” Saori said.

“Agreed!” Shiori said with a nod.

I said almost the exact same thing the first time I wandered into this town, didn't I? Beside me, I heard Saori swallow her saliva loudly, most likely because she was nervous.

“They won't get angry at us if we just waltz on in there, will they?” she asked.

“I'm sure it'll be fine,” Shiori said, as laid-back as ever.

“Yeah, you're probably right,” Saori agreed with a slight nod, then paused.

“So, uh, you can go first if you want.”

“Hm...” Shiori mused. “Thanks, but I know you're *really* excited to visit this town, so I think *you* should be the one to go first.”

Oh, great. It looked like the two of them were going to have a little debate over who should enter the town first. While all that was going on, I caught sight of a familiar-looking silhouette heading our way.

“Shiorin!” Saori exclaimed. “Look at that girl over there!”

Ah. It seemed Saori had spotted her too.

“Huh? What girl?” Shiori asked, peering around.

“That girl *there*!” Saori said, pointing to the young woman who was only a few meters away by this point.

“Whoa!” Shiori exclaimed, finally noticing her. “She has cat ears!”

“Yeah! She *actually* has cat ears! That means she's a *catgirl*!”

Seeing the cat-sith walking toward us, the twins could barely hide their excitement. *Well, would you look at that? Seems I'm not the only fan of cat ears in the family.*

"Sh-Should we try talking to her?" Saori suggested.

"Do you think she'll understand us?" Shiori asked.

Saori's eyes grew wide. "Oh, shoot! You're right. She probably won't. Ah, but we can try using hand signals! You know, like, gesturing with our hands and stuff."

Just like grandma, Saori was notoriously bad at English, which ruled out trying to use it as some sort of universal language. Instead, she figured she would try to get her point across by waving her hands around randomly.

"I'm sure that'll work. And then, soon enough, we'll be able to communicate with the people here without any issues," Shiori said, ever the laid-back type.

While they were chatting away, the cat-sith—who was none other than Kilpha—had caught sight of us.



“Oh, hey, is that Shiro I see, meow?” she called over and waved at me.

I was wearing a ring that allowed me to understand the language of this world, but the twins had nothing of the sort, so they had no idea what Kilpha had just said.

“Looks like we really don’t understand what she’s saying, huh?” Shiori muttered, looking a bit dejected.

Though Saori being Saori, she had thought Kilpha had waved at her and was just in the process of waving back with a forced smile on her face when the cat-sith called out again.

“Heya, Shiro!”

“Hi, Kilpha.”

Saori’s hand froze in midair, and she turned to me with an expression of total shock on her face. “Bro, you can *speak* their language?!”

“You’re incredible, bro-bro!” Shiori chirruped in excitement. Both twins gawked at me as Kilpha and I chatted away.

“What are you doing here, Shiro? And who are these girls?” Kilpha asked me.

I let out a strained laugh. **“It’s a long story. I’ll introduce you to them another time, if you don’t mind. Anyway, why are *you* here? Is it your day off or something?”**

She made a sound like a buzzer on a game show. **“Nope! I’m actually working right now.”**

“By yourself?” I said, somewhat surprised by this.

“Yup. Per the guild’s orders, any adventurers who aren’t engaged in a quest have to take turns patrolling the town,” she explained.

“Really? I wonder why that is. Well, at any rate, keep up the good work!” I said, smiling at her.

“Thanks, meow. I still have a few other places to visit on my patrol, so I’ll be on my way, meow.”

“Okay. Good luck with that.”

“Thanks, meow! See you, Shiro!”

“See you!” I said, giving her a little wave as she headed off.

I turned around to find my little sisters standing *very* close to me and grinning from ear to ear.

“Bro-bro...” Shiori said. “You have some explaining to do.”

“You’re going to tell us *exactly* what just happened, *aren’t you?*” Saori added.



“Seriously, what the hell, bro?!” Saori exclaimed.

“How were you able to talk to that girl with the cat ears? You’re *going* to tell me, aren’t you? *Aren’t you?*” Shiori pressed.

“Yeah! We require an explanation!” Saori demanded.

The two of them had me cornered, and I wasn’t getting away without giving them an adequate explanation. I’d basically used up all of my energy lugging the egg all the way to the town, meaning I didn’t even have the strength to push them off me.

“All right, all right, I’ll tell you! I’ll tell you everything. But first...” I trailed off and picked the egg up once more before placing it under a nearby tree. I beckoned the twins over, and they duly complied, albeit rather slowly and eyeing me suspiciously. I peered around to make sure no one else was in the vicinity before half-whispering, “Appear, portal.”

The closet door instantly materialized behind me. I opened it and turned back to the twins.

“But first,” I repeated, “let’s go home.”

The two of them stared at me in shock, their jaws practically on the floor. Grandma—who’d been enjoying a nice cup of tea in the room with her memorial altar—caught sight of the closet door opening and waved to us with a beaming smile on her face.

Chapter Three: The Twins Learn About Grandma

I picked up the egg again, stepped through the closet door, then walked over to one corner of the room, where I gently put it down. Then I went off into the kitchen to brew some black tea for the twins. When they finally appeared to have calmed down a bit, I handed them grandma's letter.

"Shiori, Saori, you should read this," I told them.

"What's that?" Shiori asked, eyeing the letter curiously.

"A letter from grandma. She addressed it to us."

The twins looked up at me in shock. After a hesitant pause, they eventually opened the envelope and squished their faces together so they could both read the letter at the same time. Every now and again, one of them would gasp an astonished "*What?!*" or an incredulous "*No way!*" but other than that, they were completely silent. Shiori seemed to stay pretty calm throughout, but Saori rubbed her eyes regularly, as if she was trying to make sure she wasn't actually dreaming. Occasionally, she'd even stop reading altogether and just stare up at the ceiling for a few seconds. It was pretty entertaining to watch. Imagine if they'd known that the person who'd written that letter was presently sitting beside them, sipping some hojicha.

After about five minutes—during which time, they had probably read the letter more than once—the twins raised their heads.

"Is..." Saori started. "Is it true, bro? Is this letter really from grandma?"

"Yup."

"So if I had a ring like the one grandma mentioned in her letter, I'd also be able to talk to those people in that other world?" Shiori asked. "I didn't notice it at first, but *you're* wearing a ring, bro-bro."

"Bingo," I said. "That's why I was able to talk to Kilpha. Oh, that's the name of the catgirl you saw earlier."

The two of them stared at me in silence. Shiori had a cold, distant smile on her face, while Saori was full-on pouting.

“Ugh, so *unfair!*”

“Huh? What’s wrong, Saori?” I asked, surprised by this sudden outburst.

“It really is,” Shiori agreed, nodding.

I turned to my other sister, shocked by how quickly the mood had turned.
“Sh-Shiori-chan?”

“I wanna talk to the people in that other world too! Especially the cute lady with the cat ears,” Shiori said.

“I’ll take that ring now, bro!” Saori declared, and she extended a hand toward me.

I slapped her hand away. “Don’t go deciding stuff like that all on your own,” I admonished her. “Besides, if I give *you* the ring, that means *I* won’t be able to communicate with those people in the other world.”

She gasped. “You’re saying *no* to your adorable little sister? And you have the nerve to pretend to be my big bro?!”

“Mama always used to tell you that since you’re the oldest, you have to share with us,” Shiori added.

“It’s been a good ten years since she last said anything like that, Shiori-chan,” I reminded her.

“Yeah, but it was mama who said it, which means it’s true forever,” she insisted.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” I sighed.

“Who cares if it makes sense or not? Just gimme the ring now!” Saori demanded before pouncing at me with the kind of strength you’d expect from a member of the track-and-field team.

“Bro-bro, give it to me! Pretty please?” Shiori pleaded before she too tackled me at pretty much the same time Saori did.

I was being attacked from two angles: Saori from the air, and Shiori from the

ground. They were perfectly in sync too, like you'd expect twins to be, and I was helpless against their joint attack, collapsing to the ground and letting out a groan that was a mix of pain and surprise as my head hit the tatami floor. Before I had time to react, the twins straddled me and effectively pinned me to the ground. Self-satisfied smiles spread across their faces. In close-combat sports, this was called the "mounted position" and it was very favorable for the combatant on top—the twins, in this case. I struggled against their grip on me with all my might, but I couldn't do a thing as their hands reached out to pry the ring from my finger. *I can't let them have it!* I thought to myself.

"Shiro, do you have a minute?"

All of a sudden, grandma was trying to get my attention.

"What is it, gra—Alice-san? I'm—I'm a little busy trying to teach my little sisters a—*ugh!*—trying to teach my little sisters a lesson at the moment. I'll show them that their big brother—ouch!—isn't so easily defeated! Ungh! Saori! Don't claw at me! And Shiori! I *told* you pinching isn't allowed in pro wrestling matches, didn't I? That hurts like hell!"

"Did you? I don't remember," Shiori said innocently in a singsong voice.

"Hey, Shiorin, how about this? I poke him in the eyes and you use the opportunity to steal the ring!" Saori suggested.

"N-Not the eyes!" I pleaded.

"Then hand over the ring," Saori demanded.

"Give us the ring and we'll let you go," Shiori said.

Grandma was watching her grandchildren wrestle from the sidelines, a smile splashed across her face. After a few minutes, she spoke up again.

"Well, it's just, I found these rings and don't they kind of look like the one you're wearing, Shiro?" she asked, uncurling her hand and presenting two rings that looked just like the one she'd left in the envelope for me.

"Gra—I mean, Alice-san! Where did you find those?" I asked, gawking at her.

"In the memorial altar," she said with a mischievous look on her face.

A likely story! She *definitely* made those rings only a few moments ago.

“You’re amazing, Alice-san!” Saori exclaimed.

“Yeah, seriously! Unlike a *certain* stingy meanie of a bro-bro over there!” Shiori added. The second grandma had produced the rings, the two of them had leaped off me and gone over to her. Grandma dropped the rings into their hands and they squealed in delight.

“Hey, Shiorin.”

“What is it, Saorin?”

“So this means, if we wear these rings, we’ll be able to speak the language of that other world the next time we go over there, right?”

“I think so, yeah.”

“That’s so awesome!”

“And if these rings don’t work, we can always get bro-bro to exchange his ring with ours!” Shiori declared.

“Oh! That’s true! Shiorin, you’re a genius!”

“Hey! How do you think your poor big brother will feel if you do that, girls?” I protested, but they ignored me. The two of them were grinning from ear to ear.

It hadn’t been easy, but thankfully, the ring issue had been resolved.



The next order of business for the twins was the skill books.

“Hey, bro, what are these ‘books’ grandma mentions in her letter?” Saori inquired.

“They’re weird books that give you mysterious powers when you read them. They’re called ‘skill books,’” I explained.

“Wow, really? Did you read them, bro-bro?” Shiori asked.

“I did, yeah,” I said. “And they gave me this power.”

I took a 10,000-yen bill out of my wallet and used my Equivalent Exchange skill on it, instantly turning it into a silver coin. The twins gaped at me, their eyes wide as saucers.

“Bro, was that a magic trick you just did? That bill turned into a weird medal-looking thingy!” Saori exclaimed.

“It’s not a medal. It’s a silver coin. It’s one of the denominations they use in the other world,” I explained.

“That’s money from the other world?” Shiori said, considering the possibilities. “So if we read the same books, we’ll be able to use skills like that too?”

“Yup. All I did was follow the instructions in the letter,” I said simply. “I put on the ring, read the books, and all of a sudden, I was able to use these skills.”

“That’s insane!” Saori exclaimed in awe. “I wanna read those books too! Where are they? C’mon, bring ’em out!”

“All right, all right,” I said, laughing. “If I remember correctly, I put them somewhere around here...” I inspected one of the shelves near the altar. “Ah, here’s one!”

I retrieved the Equivalent Exchange skill book and handed it to Saori.

“Here you go,” I said. “That’s the book that gave me the skill I demonstrated just now.”

She started leafing through the book in silence. After a while, she looked up at me and said, “Bro...”

“Hm? What is it?”

“Don’t play dumb! Is this a prank? There’s nothing written in here!” she scowled.

“Wait, what? Seriously?” I said.

“Yeah! I mean, look here! And here! And here!” she said, flicking through the pages of the book and showing me that they were all blank. “There’s nothing in here!” she concluded before thrusting the book into my hands.

She was right. There wasn’t a single letter, rune, or anything else on any of the pages. It looked more like an empty notebook than a skill book.

“How is that possible?” I wondered aloud. “When I read it, the pages were

littered with all these mysterious symbols...” I stood there frowning as I tried to wrap my head around what could’ve happened to the text, when all of a sudden, a voice piped up behind me.

“Maybe when someone reads the book for the first time, the contents of it disappear?” grandma suggested with an air of nonchalance, acting as if she hadn’t been the one who’d created the book in the first place.

“What?! And grandma didn’t leave books for me and Shiorin?” Saori scowled.

She crossed her arms in front of her chest and puffed out her cheeks like a child throwing a tantrum. Shiori, on the other hand, had a serene smile on her face, like she always did. *Though, is it just me or is the vein on her temple throbbing? It’s just me, right? Right?*

More to the point, what had been going through grandma’s head in the first place? If she’d wanted her precious granddaughters to visit the other world, couldn’t she have at least made some books for them too?

“Aw, come on now. Give me a smile,” grandma said to Saori. “It’s such a shame to see a cute girl like you looking so down in the mouth.”

“Alice-san...” Saori mumbled.

“Your grandmother left rings for both of you, right? Then I’m sure she must have left some of these ‘skill books’—or whatever it is they’re called—for you too. My guess is she hid them somewhere in this house,” grandma lied.

I glared at her from the other side of the room. If my eyes could actually shoot daggers, she’d have been stone dead by now. Regardless, she didn’t even glance my way.

“Do you really think so?” Shiori said excitedly. “So if we search the house, we’ll find them?”

“I’m sure you will,” grandma assured her with a nod.

“I really wanna find them. But grandma’s house is so big! It’s gonna take ages to search the whole place,” Shiori whined.

“We could just ask bro to find the books for us, Shiorin!” Saori suggested.

“Oh, good idea! Bro-bro, can you go look for our books for us? Pretty please?”

“All right, all right,” I sighed. “I’ll get on it in a bit, yeah?”

“Thank you,” Shiori drawled.

“We’re counting on you, bro!” Saori added.

“I’m sure your brother will find your books in no time, girls,” grandma said.

Great. I’d somehow ended up getting roped into searching for books that didn’t even exist. I figured grandma would probably magic them into existence at some point, but even so...

“Anyway, Shiorin, while bro’s looking for our skill books, wanna go back over to the other world and try out our new rings?” Saori suggested excitedly. “We should totally go and talk to that cute girl with the cat ears!”

“Nope, nuh-uh, no way,” I said, putting the kibosh on that idea. “It’s already late. You can go tomorrow.”

Saori glanced out of the window and saw that the sun was almost completely below the horizon. “*Fine*,” she huffed, rolling her eyes. “I don’t like doing what you say, bro, but I *guess* you’re right for once. It is pretty much nighttime now.”

“We gotta listen to bro-bro from time to time to keep him happy,” Shiori said. “Plus, I’m getting hungry.”

“Oh, right! We haven’t eaten anything since lunch!” Saori said, and just as the words left her mouth, her stomach growled softly, almost as if this sentence had been a trigger for her body to finally remember it was famished.

Grandma produced the dumplings we’d bought earlier from a plastic bag. “Shiro and I got dumplings. Want some?” she offered.

“Yes, please!” the two of them exclaimed in unison, jumping at the offer.

“Bro, go cook some rice to go with them! Right this minute, you hear?” Saori ordered. “I wanna have some nice fluffy white rice with my dumplings.”

“I want miso soup! With plenty of veggies,” Shiori added.

Grandma was next to place her order. “Bring me some pickled vegetables while you’re at it, will you, Shiro?”

I sighed. “Fine. I’ll go get all that for you guys,” I said.

“Yay!” the twins cheered.

I stood up and walked out of the room.

“Oh, by the way, Alice-san...” I heard Saori pipe up as I went off down the hallway. “You knew about that other world too, didn’t you?”

“Hm? What makes you say that?” came the response.

“Well, you didn’t look shocked at all when you saw what was in the closet.”

“Yeah, I noticed that,” Shiori added. “Did bro-bro tell you about it?”

Grandma chuckled. “He did, yeah.”

“Knew it,” Shiori said triumphantly.

“Well, you *are* his childhood friend, after all, so it’s not surprising he told you,” Saori mused.

They were talking so loudly, I could still hear their conversation clearly when I reached the kitchen. After bringing everyone what they’d ordered, the four of us enjoyed a nice dinner, then we all took turns taking baths before eventually heading off to bed. And throughout all of it, grandma had a permanent smile plastered across her face.

Chapter Four: The Twins' Second Trip to the Other World

The next day arrived and the Amata siblings found ourselves once again standing in front of the closet door.

"C'mon, bro, hurry up! I wanna go visit that cute little town!" Saori demanded, trembling with excitement.

"Take us there, bro-bro. C'mon, c'mon!" Shiori whined impatiently.

Unlike the day before, however, there was an extra person standing beside us.

"Um, gra—I mean, Alice-san..." I started. "Are you *sure* you want to go there with us?"

"Hm? I can't come with you?"

Yup, that's right. Grandma was tagging along this time.

"It's not that you *can't*. You're welcome to come with us. Very much so. But, uh..." I hesitated. "I just didn't expect you to actually want to come."

I'd thrown on my usual red jacket, while the twins were wearing their school uniforms. By contrast, grandma had put on the outfit I'd seen her in at Ninoritch's harvest festival, and everything about it screamed "witch," including the cloak she had wrapped around herself. She basically looked like a fantasy game character.

"There's something I want to go check out over there. Oh, but rest assured..." she said before lowering her voice and bringing her lips closer to my ear. "I'm going solo on this one."

"Huh? Why's that?" I asked, surprised by this.

Grandma chuckled. "Well, remember what happened at the harvest festival? I'd like to avoid a repeat of that. I don't want to go spoiling my grandchildren's

experience, after all.”

Nicknamed the “Immortal Witch,” grandma was a huge celebrity in Ruffaltio. Literally *everyone* knew her name, and if anyone recognized her while we were over there, she would find herself instantly mobbed by a crowd of adoring, awestruck fans. It sounded like grandma didn’t want something like that happening with us around, so she’d made the decision to go off on her own this time.

“It wouldn’t spoil anything for me, though,” I noted.

“Aw, that’s sweet of you. Thanks, Shiro,” grandma said, shooting me a smile. “But the twins still don’t know my true identity, and I don’t want them to find out about all that just yet.”

She brought a finger up to her lips and made a quiet “shhh” sound to underline her point. The Immortal Witch: Alice Gawamio. Our supposedly dead grandmother: Arisugawa Mio. If anyone in the other world were to recognize grandma and call her by her full name, it’d be a dead giveaway. The twins would easily be able to piece things together and realize that the pretty lady living with us wasn’t my childhood friend after all, but actually our grandmother.

“‘Just yet’? So you *do* plan on telling them at some point, then?” I inquired.

“Yup. But I want it to be a big reveal, you know? Like, ‘Surprise! I was your grandma all along!’”

“A big reveal, huh?” I mused. “Well, it *would* be fun to see their reactions, I’ll give you that.”

“Wouldn’t it just? Anyway, that’s not the only reason I’m not hanging around with you today. Like I said, there’s something I really need to go and investigate,” she said, and all of a sudden, a somewhat grim expression appeared on her face.

Something Alice the Immortal Witch *herself* needed to investigate? That sounded like it was a pretty big deal.

“My worries might be unfounded, but it’s still something I’d like to check out. Just in case,” she added.

“I see.”

“Oh, and my magic link with Peace will be down for a while too, so be careful out there, okay?” she warned. “I won’t be able to come and save you if you get yourself in trouble.”

Peace was a little black kitten that Karen, Aina, and I had picked up on our way to Mazela. I hadn’t thought much of his presence at first, because he’d seemed like a normal cat who really, *really* loved napping, but it turned out he’d actually been grandma’s familiar all along. This basically meant grandma could link her mind to his and see and hear everything he could. Of course, now that I knew this, I wasn’t sure I could even be in the same room as Peace without worrying that grandma might be spying on me.

“So I don’t need to worry about you eavesdropping on me for a while. Is that what you’re saying?” I said.

“Why do you look so happy all of a sudden?” she said pointedly.

“Do I?” I said innocently. “Must be your imagination.”

Grandma chuckled. “Sure it is, sure it is, dearie. Whatever you say.” She put up the hood on her cloak, then added, “Take care of the twins for me, Shiro.”

“Will do,” I said with a nod.

We finally stepped through the portal and walked all the way to the entrance of Ninoritch, where grandma declared she was going to go do a bit of exploring by herself.

“See you later, Alice-san!” Saori called out, waving her off.

“If you stumble across any cute guys, introduce ’em to me!” Shiori added.

“Oh, good thinking, Shiorin! Me too! I wanna meet cute guys too!” Saori piped up.

Grandma waved back at the girls and headed off to who knows where.



“All righty. Let’s head into the town, shall we?” I said. “Stay close, okay?”

“Okay!” the twins replied in unison.

And so, I ambled through the streets of Ninoritch with my little sisters in tow.

“Look, Shiorin! Cat ears! There’s another girl with cat ears!” Saori said excitedly, pointing out a catgirl.

“That little boy over there has dog ears, Saorin!” Shiori said. “How *cute*!”

“Oh em gee, you’re right! That boy’s gonna be a real looker when he grows up, I can tell!” Saori said.

“Definitely!”

The two of them seemed to be having the time of their lives walking around the little town. Thanks to the rings they were now wearing, they were finally able to understand the people from this world, and they said hello to everyone around them, their breathing ragged with excitement. They marveled at every little thing they saw, and whenever we came across one of the many beastfolk that frequented the town, they instantly stopped in their tracks and giggled excitedly.

“Next stop: the marketplace,” I announced.

“The marketplace?” Saori inquired.

“Yup, the marketplace. It’s the busiest part of town,” I explained.

The twins’ response was instant.

“I wanna go!” Shiori exclaimed.

“Me too!”

“Yup, I thought you might,” I chuckled. “This way.”

I was busy showing the twins around the marketplace, when all of a sudden, I heard a familiar voice calling out my name.

“Mister Shiro!”

I turned to seek out the owner of the voice and was met by the sight of Aina waving at me with Peace perched on her shoulder. I waved back, and she took that as her cue to run up to me.

“Good morning, Mister Shiro,” she said.

“Morning, Aina.”

Peace meowed as if to say: “And what about me, huh?”

“Good morning to you too, Peace.”

Meow!

I gently scratched him under the chin and he started purring contentedly.

“Fancy meeting you here, Aina,” I said to the little girl.

“I know!” the little girl said, beaming at me. “I was just on my way to the shop when I saw you from across the street.”

I suddenly heard two loud gulps behind me.

“Bro-bro?”

“What is it, Shiori-chan?”

“Who’s this cute little girl?” she asked.

A quick glance at Aina’s face told me she was also wondering who the two teenagers tagging along with me were. *Guess it’s time for some introductions*, I thought to myself.

“Aina, the two girls you see behind me are my little sisters,” I told her.

“Little sisters?” she repeated, her eyes widening.

“Yup. This is—” I started, but Shiori cut me off.

“I’m Shiori, the Amata family’s firstborn daughter, and bro-bro’s *beloved* little sister! It’s nice to meet you, Aina!”

“N-Nice to meet you...” the little girl stammered.

“Aw, she’s so *cute*!” Shiori squealed, and I could practically see the heart shapes in her eyes.

“A-And this is—” I said, starting to introduce Saori before being cut off midsentence once again.

“I’m Saori, the Amata family’s secondborn daughter, and bro’s *adorable* little sister!”

“Adorable? Who said you were—*ouch!*”

Saori continued to beam at Aina while grinding her heel into my foot. Man, that hurt.

“So, uh, it’s Miss Shiori and...” —pause— “Miss Saori, right?” the little girl repeated to make sure she had remembered their names correctly.

“Shiorin! Did you hear that? She called us *Miss* Shiori and *Miss* Saori! Oh em gee, my heart can’t take it!”

“Same! My heart actually, like, started racing when she said ‘Miss.’ It hits different when it’s a cute little girl saying it, huh?”

Well, it looked as though my little sisters were really enjoying their new titles. I could almost hear the heart shapes punctuating the end of their sentences as they talked, and it was easy to tell just by looking at their faces that they absolutely adored this little girl. Aina, on the other hand, still seemed in a state of shock.

“I-It’s really nice to meet the two of you,” she finally managed. “My name is Aina, and I work at Mister Shiro’s shop. Mister Shiro has done a lot for me, and I’m very thankful for all of his help.”

She rounded off her self-introduction with a little bow. Coming from an eight-year-old, it was one hell of a self-introduction, being both crystal clear and articulate. I knew a pair of teenagers who’d do well to learn a thing or two from her.

“Oh, really? So you work at bro’s shop—Wait, hold on a minute!” Saori gasped, then whipped her head around to glare at me. She looked *pissed*. “Bro! Y-You’re making a child *work* for you?!”

“That’s awful!” Shiori said, also shooting me an accusatory glare. “She’s so small and cute. Bro-bro, you’re a brute. A total *monster*. A real pathetic excuse for a man.”

“Just you wait until we get home! I’m gonna tell mama about this!”

“And *I’ll* tell papa.”

The two of them proceeded to boo me loudly in the middle of the street.

“Hold your horses, girls. Allow me to explain...” I started.

“Are you going to make excuses now, bro-bro? That’s so uncool,” Shiori said.

“How about you listen to what I have to say first and *then* you can pass judgment, yeah?” I suggested.

“Oh, fine,” Saori said. “We’re listening.”

“Thanks. Now, let’s see...” I began. “I should probably start by telling you how I met Aina. When I first arrived in this town, I...”

I recounted my first encounter with Aina to the twins: how I’d bought some flowers from her, and how she’d helped me to set up and run my shop in the marketplace until Karen had kindly let us use her old house as a store instead. Once I was in full flow, I went on to tell them about the Fairy’s Blessing Adventurers’ Guild and the satellite store I’d set up in their guildhall, and even about the fact that I’d joined a merchant guild—the Eternal Promise—over in the feudal capital of the region. Of course, I *may* have exaggerated certain details in my tale, but not by much, I swear. When I was done regaling the twins with my various success stories in this world, Saori turned to her sister with a pensive look on her face.

“Shiorin, do you think we’ll manage to find boyfriends in this world?” she said.

“I hope so! I wanna date a handsome prince who rides about on a white horse! My very own Prince Charming...” Shiori mused dreamily.

“And I want a hot guy with cat ears who treats me like a *queen*!” Saori announced. “Oh, and he *has* to have a super fluffy tail! For petting purposes, obvs.”

“Oh! Can I pet it too?” Shiori asked her.

Yup. They haven’t listened to a word I’ve said, I thought dejectedly. Seeing how crestfallen I was, Aina softly patted me on the back and Peace meowed loudly in my ear. If grandma had been watching us through Peace’s eyes from wherever she was at that moment in time, I was in no doubt that she’d have been rolling around on the floor, creased up with laughter.



“So you really do have a shop then, bro? And this little cutie’s your assistant? I see, I see,” Saori said.

“She’s such a good girl, working a full-time job even though she’s so little,” Shiori stated, sounding rather in awe of Aina.

We’d relocated to my shop by this point, and Aina and I were getting everything ready to open for the day, while the twins busily stuffed their faces with snacks they’d brought over from Japan.

“Mister Shiro was the one who saved me when I really needed money,” the little girl explained, a gentle smile on her face.

“Wow, that’s so cool of you, bro!” Saori said.

“Bro-bro’s amazing!” Shiori agreed.

“I know! I’m so happy I met him,” Aina said.

Aina and the twins had only known each other for about an hour, but they were already becoming fast friends. Shiori and Saori doted on the little girl, and she seemed to enjoy the attention.

“You’re so hardworking, Aina!” Saori said, praising her for the umpteenth time.

“She really is. We can’t just stand around and do nothing, Saorin,” Shiori declared with a determined look on her face.

“You’re right, Shiorin! Hey, bro!” she shouted over to me.

“What is it?” I replied.

“Bring us that egg we found yesterday!”

“Uh, okay, but what do you wanna do with it exactly? Are you still planning on selling it to make some money?” I inquired.

“Well, *duh*!” Saori said, as if this should’ve been obvious. “Of course I am!”

“If we don’t, what was the point of carrying it all the way to this town?” Shiori added.

“Might I remind you that I was the one who carried it here?” I said.

Shiori simply shrugged at this. “You’re our big brother. It’s only natural you’d do the heavy lifting for us.”

“Broooo!” Saori whined. “Bring out the egg! C’mon, hurry it up!”

“All right, all right,” I said, relenting. “Wait right there a minute, okay?”

I hurried up to the break room on the second floor, opened the portal to grandma’s house, then grabbed the egg. By the time I’d made it back down to the first floor of my store again, my hips were screaming in pain.

“Wowee! What a big egg!” Aina exclaimed, her eyes goggling.

“I’m the one who found it!” Saori boasted.

“Really, Miss Saori?” Aina said.

“Yup!”

“She did, though I was the one who carried it all the way here,” I pointed out. “Anyway, Aina, do you have an idea what kind of egg this is?” I asked the little girl.

But she simply shook her head. “No. I’ve never seen an egg as big as that before.”

“I see. Guess it’s not one of the more common types, then,” I mused. Or at the very least, it was safe to say that it wasn’t the kind of egg the residents here usually had sunny side up.

“Bro, do you know where we can go to sell this egg?” Saori asked.

“Hm, not really,” I replied. “Maybe over at the tavern?”

“I’m worried someone’s gonna try to buy it for way less than it’s actually worth, though,” Shiori pouted.

“That won’t do! I wanna make loads of money off this thing!” Saori said.

“Okay, okay, I get it, girls,” I sighed. They were throwing yet another unreasonable request at me, especially as Ninoritch was a remote town in the middle of nowhere. But before we could even think about trying to get full price for this egg, there was one crucial thing we needed to do first. “In that case, we need to go get this egg appraised to find out what kind it is!” I said.

“Can you do that for us?” Saori asked.

“Well, of course I can,” I answered smugly.

Aina took one look at my face and immediately understood where I was going with this. “Oh, I know what you’re planning, Mister Shiro!” she chirruped.

“Of course you do, Aina. After all, there’s only one place we can go to learn about this egg, and that’s...” I trailed off to build up the suspense.

“That’s...” the twins repeated, waiting for me to finish my sentence with bated breath.

“The Adventurers’ Guild, of course!” I declared.

Chapter Five: Time to Get This Egg Appraised!

“So, wait, let me get this straight. You’re not actually here to *sell* anything; you just have some loot you want appraised. Is that right?”

“Yes. The lady at the reception desk said you could do that for us.”

We were presently in the trading post inside the Fairy’s Blessing Adventurers’ Guild. When we’d arrived at the guildhall and told the receptionist they’d hired recently about our little egg issue, she’d directed us over to this section.

“Well, just so you know, I’m by no means a professional when it comes to loot appraisal. I just happen to know a little bit more about monsters and herbs than the other adventurers here. Though I guess that knowledge was enough to secure myself a job here once my adventuring days came to an end.”

The cheerful old man speaking to us had seemingly retired from the adventuring life a little while back, and while his scar-covered face and body made him look pretty scary, his smile was warm and gentle.

“Please don’t sell yourself short,” I told him. “I’m sure you’re great at what you do. The guild wouldn’t have kept you around if you weren’t.”

“Well, thanks, lad, but I should tell you now that flattery will get you nowhere,” he replied with a smile.

“I wasn’t trying to flatter you. I genuinely meant it,” I said.

A booming, boisterous laugh erupted from the man. “Oh, is that so?” he asked, an amused twinkle in his eye.

He went on to explain that, after retiring from adventuring, he had become a member of staff at the Fairy’s Blessing guild, and had been put in charge of dissecting monsters and putting a price tag on all the loot. Plus, due to his vast knowledge of monsters and herbs, he was also occasionally tasked with identifying loot. I’d heard it said that he could identify a monster just from a single bone or claw, or even from a chunk of its flesh.

“Still, it’s not every day a merchant comes to the guild with an appraisal job,” the man noted.

“It’s kind of a complicated story,” I said evasively.

“A complicated story, huh?” the man mused. “Would it have anything to do with that young lass behind you, by any chance?” he asked, glancing over my shoulder. Saori was standing there with her arms crossed in front of her chest.

“Bingo,” I said. “She’s actually my little sister, you see.”

“I-I’m Amata Saori! N-N-Nice to meet you!” my little sister stammered, her voice trembling nervously and her expression as stiff as a board.

Well, the old man *did* look pretty scary, so it wasn’t all that much of a surprise that she was a bit on edge around him. Oh, and if you’re wondering what had happened to my other sister, she had decided to stay at the shop to help out Aina. Shiori always had loved cute things above everything else, so when presented with the choice between accompanying us to the Adventurers’ Guild—the superior option, in my opinion—or staying in the shop with cute little Aina, she’d chosen the latter without even a second’s hesitation.

“Nice meeting you too, lass. I’m Barril, one of the staff here,” the man said, introducing himself before turning back to me. “So she’s your little sister, is she? Now that you’ve said it, you two do look an awful lot like each other. Well, I’d better make sure I do a good job on this appraisal, then, hadn’t I?” He flashed us a gentle smile.

I heard Saori let out a quiet “Eep!” behind me. I figured she was probably still wary of his scar-covered face, which wasn’t really a surprise, since she’d been raised in modern-day Japan, and it was likely that in her mind, a man covered in scars from head to toe could only spell trouble. Of course, I’d gotten used to meeting battle-scarred folk by this point, but I recalled how I had also been terrified of adventurers when I first showed up in Ruffaltio.

“Anyway, let’s cut to the chase. I’d like you to appraise an egg my sister has found, if that’s all right with you,” I said.

“An egg?” the man said, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes, an egg. Do you think you can help us with it?”

“Well, if it’s something I’ve seen before, then sure,” the man said with a confident nod. “Monster eggs tend to be very distinct, either due to their color, their size, or even the texture of the shell. It should be a fairly easy task to identify what it is.”

“That’s awesome! But what else would you expect from the Fairy’s Blessing loot appraiser?” I said with a grin.

“Stop teasing me, lad, and bring out the goods already,” the man said without a hint of venom or malice in his voice.

“Okay, okay. Here you go,” I said, setting the egg—which I’d been carrying around on my back in a rack frame that was kind of like a backpack but without all the material—down on the counter.

“That’s...” the man said, taken aback. “That’s huge.”

“I know, right? I’m pretty sure it’s a monster egg, but I have no idea what kind of monster could have laid it,” I explained.

“Where’d you find it?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but Saori beat me to it. “In the forest!” she called out.

“Gigheena Forest, you mean?” the man inquired.

“‘Gigheena Forest’?” my little sister repeated, tilting her head to one side in confusion. She’d only been in this world for a matter of hours, so it was no wonder she had no idea what the man was talking about. I nodded and replied for her.

“Yup, that’s right,” I said. “We found it in Gigheena Forest.”

“The forest, huh?” the man mused. “May I touch it?”

“Go ahead. I mean, that *is* why we brought it here in the first place,” I said.

Barril nodded and started inspecting the egg. First off, he measured it, then he tried holding it aloft, and after that, he ran his fingers along the pattern on the shell and gave it a gentle slap. A good ten minutes or so later, he spoke again.

“Sorry for keeping you. I think I know what this big fella here is now, more or less.”

“Really? Impressive!” I marveled. “Could you please tell us what you’ve worked out?”

“Sure thing, lad. But first, I have a question for you, lass,” the man said, turning his attention to Saori. “Did you *really* find this egg out in the forest?”

“Y-Yes, I did! Right, bro?” my little sister said, turning my way to urge me to confirm what she was saying was true.

I nodded. “She did. I was with her when she found it. It was just lying on the ground in the forest.”

“Was there a nest nearby? They’re usually made out of sticks and dried grass, and they’re about this size,” he explained, throwing his arms wide to give us an idea of the scale he was talking about.

“I looked around, but I couldn’t see anything like that, no,” I said.

“I see. Well, if it’s you saying that, it must be true,” the man concluded.

“Hey, wait a minute!” Saori piped up. “Why are you so quick to believe my bro when you’ve basically just called me a liar?”

“Now, now, Saori,” I said, trying to soothe her. “Your big bro just happens to be a very virtuous person. It’s why people trust me so easily. See? You can almost see the halo above my head.”

“What the hell are you talking about? You? *Virtuous*? There’s no way in hell!” she scoffed.

“Okay, ouch. Why are you so cruel to your poor ol’ big brother, Saori?” I whined, overexaggerating how hurt I was by her cruel barbs.

Barril watched us bicker with an amused smile on his lips. “Okay, lad, I get it. You and your sister are real close. Can we continue?”

“Oh, sorry about that. Of course we—” I started saying, but Saori cut me off.

“Ahem, excuse me, but this doofus and I aren’t close at all! I’ll have you know that—”

This time, I was the one who didn't let her finish her sentence, clapping my hand over her mouth to shut her up.

"Sorry about all that, Mr. Barril. We can resume our discussion now."

He nodded. "Sure thing. Well, I was a *bit* perplexed at first, since the pattern on this egg isn't one I've ever come across before, but this is definitely a new variety of ebirasornis egg. Or a subspecies, maybe," Barril speculated.

"An ebirasornis?" Saori and I repeated at the same time, though since I still had my hand over her mouth, her words came out a tad muffled.

"Yup, an ebirasornis," Barril said with a nod. "They're those giant bird-type monsters that walk about on two legs." He glanced at us to gauge our reaction. "Looks like you don't know what they are, huh? Well, I guess it's pretty rare to stumble across 'em in this region, so I'm not all that surprised."

According to Barril, ebirasornises were huge galliform birds that were used as substitutes for horses in certain regions, and while they weren't as fast as their equine counterparts, they had way more stamina and could run at top speed for hours on end, with some even managing to run for half a day without needing a break. Other than that, they were very gentle creatures, and fledglings tended to get attached to humans pretty quickly. For all of these reasons, nobles and royals often favored these monsters over other mounts.

"My guess is a goblin or some other creature stole this egg from its nest, then had the misfortune of crossing paths with a group of monsters, or maybe even some adventurers," Barril said.

"And faced with these adversaries, the goblin ran off, abandoning the egg in the forest. Is that what you're saying?" I asked.

"That's probably about right, yeah," Barril said, nodding. "If I remember correctly, I have a..." He paused, then spotted what he was looking for. "Ah, there it is."

He took a book that looked like a bestiary from one of the shelves behind him and flicked through the pages before landing on the one he wanted. He set it down on the counter in front of us.

"There. That's an ebirasornis," he said, pointing to a fluffy bird that looked

somewhat like an ostrich.

“Oh em gee! It’s so *cute*!” Saori whispered, and she instantly whipped out her smartphone to take a picture of the page. Well, she seemed to like it, anyway.

“So, anyhoo, what do you plan on doing with this thing?” Barril inquired, placing a hand on the egg.

“That’s part of the reason we’re here today. What do *you* think we should do with it?” I asked him.

“Hm...” he said, thinking about this. “If I were you, I’d sell it.”

“Really? May I ask why?” I said.

“Well, it’s quite simple, really. It’s true that ebirasornises are very useful monsters, but if you don’t know how to raise one, you won’t get a whole lot out of it,” he explained.

“Makes sense,” I said with a nod.

“Now, if you owned its parent too, that’d change things, since it could raise the fledgling itself. But seeing as you don’t, that means you’d have to do all of that yourself. Do you know anything about raising a creature like this?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Nope, not a thing.”

“That’s what I thought. So yeah, selling it to someone who knows what to do with it would be the best idea—both for you and for the fledgling. Besides, ebirasornises are pretty popular among the upper echelons of society, and while there aren’t any nobles around here, if you journey over to another town, you can probably find a buyer fairly quickly.”

That all made total sense to me. Rather than keeping a monster I didn’t have the first clue how to raise, selling it to someone who did would be beneficial for all involved, especially the monster itself.

“Say I did decide to sell it...” I said. “Do you have any idea who I should entrust the matter to? Gerald, the loot merchant, perhaps?”

“Hm, no, I wouldn’t recommend that,” Barril replied. “Sure, you’d probably get a good chunk of money if you sold it to him, but if I were you, I’d go ask the

GM to put me in touch with a noble, or maybe even someone from the royal family.”

“You think I should ask Ney?” I said, slightly surprised by this suggestion.

“Sure do. She’s a noble herself, after all. Well, one that ran away from her family...” he corrected himself. “But even so, I’m sure she still has connections.”

“I see,” I said. “Now that you mention it, I do remember someone saying she’s from a noble family of some renown.”

Ney Mirage was the woman who had basically built the Ninoritch branch of the Fairy’s Blessing guild from the ground up. She was a real beauty, and extremely competent at her job to boot. I’d overheard several adventurers chatting about how she was actually a noble from another country, and that her family was incredibly rich.

“I see,” I said again, thinking aloud. “Maybe asking Ney is my best option, then.”

“Yup. Besides, she’s always saying how much she owes you. So I can’t see her refusing if you ask,” Barril said.

I chuckled. “I don’t remember her owing me anything. It’s the other way around, in fact. I feel like I’m always coming to her for help.”

“Ah, there it is!” Barril said with a grin. “There you go, acting all modest again. See? This is why so many people around here like you so much, lad. No wonder everyone’s always more than happy to assist you whenever you come asking for help.” He treated me to a teasing wink. “Do you want me to go talk to the GM on your behalf?” he suggested.

“Thanks for the offer, but I think I should do it myself,” I said.

“Sure thing.”

I nodded and was just about to say goodbye to Barril when Saori suddenly punched me square in the solar plexus. I couldn’t help a groan of pain escaping me at this surprise attack.

“S-Saori?” I squawked. “Why the hell did you just hit me?!”

“Because ever since earlier, you’ve left me out of this conversation

completely!” she huffed, putting her hands on her hips to emphasize her discontent at the situation. “Are you forgetting, bro? *I’m* the one who found this egg!” She pointed at the egg on the counter. “So *I’m* the one who gets to decide what we do with it!”

“I’ll share the money with you,” I assured her. “Just let me handle the negotiations and we can—”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk,” Saori said, raising a finger to interrupt me. “You really don’t get it, do you, bro? Why do you even assume that we’re going to be selling this egg in the first place?”

“But *you’re* the one who said you wanted to!” I protested.

“Shut up!” she yelled and slapped me across the face, the noise echoing around the room. I yelped in pain. “Bro, do you have any idea how you look right at this moment? I literally thought your eyes were about to turn into yen signs! You looked just like papa does when he stares at his bankbook,” she said.

“L-Like *dad*?!” I gasped.

“Yeah! No human should *ever* be allowed to look like that!” she said firmly.

“Damn, did I *really* look like him just then?” I breathed.

The only thing that ever brought our father any joy was when he was saving money. Apparently, he had saved up every yen of pocket money and New Year’s money he’d ever gotten, all the way back to when he was a kid, and he’d done the same with his work bonuses. He would spend hours on end staring at his bankbook while guzzling down alcohol and telling me over and over that booze never tasted as good as when he was looking at what was in his savings account.

“Wow, I really need to be careful. I seriously don’t wanna end up like dad,” I said, horrified by the thought of it.

“Are you back to normal now, bro?” Saori asked me.

“Yes, yes, I am. Thank you for that. So, anyway, what *do* you plan to do with the egg, then?”

She flashed me a brilliant smile. “I’m gonna raise it myself!”

I didn't say anything for a few seconds, then eventually managed to splutter,
"Excuse me? What did you just say?"

"I said I'm gonna raise it myself!" she repeated.

"What?!"

The horrified cries that escaped from the mouths of Barril and me echoed all
around the guildhall.

Chapter Six: The Egg Hatches

“So the guy told us the egg is actually an ebi...”—pause—“Uh, what was it again? An ebi...”—pause—“Well, it’s an ebi-*something* egg! They’re these, like, huge super fluffy birds!” an excited Saori explained to Shiori and Aina. She’d immediately jumped on the two of them the second we’d gotten back to the store.

“A baby birdie, huh?” Shiori reflected. “If it’s as huge as you say it is, maybe we’ll be able to ride it!”

“We can! The guy down at the guild said some people use them instead of horses,” Saori explained.

“That’s really cool!” Shiori exclaimed. “I so wanna ride it when it’s big enough.”

“Me too, Shiorin!”

“We should *totally* ride it together, Saorin,” Shiori said.

Now that we knew what it actually was, my sisters were even more excited about the egg. And they weren’t the only ones.

“Mister Shiro...” Aina said.

“What is it, Aina?”

“Is it really an ebirasornis egg?” she asked me, her eyes sparkling.

“Yup. At least, that’s what the guy at the guild told us it was. He even said it was probably either some new type of egg or maybe a subspecies,” I said. “So you know what ebirasornises are, do you, Aina?”

“Yeah. I saw one once, when I was little,” she replied.

“Really? The guy at the guild told us they were really big. Is that true?” I asked.

She nodded. “They’re, like, *this* big,” she said, spreading her arms wide to

show me how big they were. Or at least, she tried to. She was still a kid, so there was no way she could get her arms wide enough to accurately portray the actual size of an ebirasornis.

“Gosh! That big?” I said, exaggerating my surprise.

“Yeah! They’re even bigger than horses!”

“Wow. That’s impressive,” I said.

Bigger than horses, huh? These birds might be even stronger than ostriches, in that case, I silently mused to myself.

“Mister Shiro...” Aina said again.

“Hm?”

“I, um...” She trailed off, fidgeting a little.

“What is it?” I said, gently encouraging her to tell me what was on her mind.

“I’d like to ride the ebirasornis one day too...” she said shyly. “Can I?”

She peered up at me with puppy dog eyes, shooting an occasional glance in the direction of the egg. I smiled at her and gently stroked her hair.

“Of course you can. When it’s big enough, you can ride around on it, okay?” I said.

“For real? Can I really?” she asked, her face lighting up.

“For real,” I confirmed.

She let out an excited little “Yay!” and started jumping up and down ecstatically. The twins, meanwhile, seemed deep in thought.

“Saorin, what should we call it?” Shiori asked her twin.

Her sister thought about it for a moment. “What do you think of ‘Tart’?”

“What? You want to name it after a *pastry*? Sounds kinda dumb. C’mon, be a bit serious for once,” Shiori pouted.

“I *am* being serious, you big meanie!” Saori retorted, mirroring her sister’s pouty expression.

“No, you’re not!”

They were already thinking about what they were going to name this monster.

“Well, what do *you* suggest, then, Shiorin?” Saori asked.

“Suama,” Shiori answered impassively.

“What?”

“Suama,” she repeated.

“Suama? Like, those pink mochi things, you mean?” Saori said.

“Yeah!” Shiori confirmed. “You know how much I love them, right?”

“I mean, I *guess*...” Saori said with a slight shrug. “But they’re just your current obsession, aren’t they?”

“What’s your point? You got something against suama?” Shiori asked, puffing out her cheeks.

“Not really, but I know you’re just gonna get tired of them soon, like you always do,” Saori pointed out.

“But I wanna call the birdie ‘Suama’!” Shiori protested.

“Wait, I have an idea,” Saori said, then turned to Aina. “Aina, could you help us decide what to name it?”

“Good thinking! Which do you like better, Aina? Suama is a really cute name, isn’t it?” Shiori asked the little girl.

“Tart is *much* cuter! What do you think, Aina? Tart! It has a really nice ring to it, doesn’t it?”

It seemed the twins couldn’t decide on a name between themselves and were delegating the task to poor little Aina. So “Tart” or “Suama,” huh? But which name would Aina choose? Come to think of it, why weren’t the twins asking for *my* opinion? I am their brother, after all! While I just stood there, wallowing in self-pity, Aina finally made a judgment.

“I think...” she started hesitantly, before declaring, “‘Suama’ is cuter.”

“Hear that, Saorin? She likes ‘Suama’!” Shiori said, beaming.

“I guess that’s decided, then,” Saori said, her teeth gritted in frustration. “I’m the one who suggested asking Aina in the first place, so I can’t really argue. ‘Suama’ it is.”

“You hear that? That’s your name! Suama!” Shiori cooed at the egg. “Oh, I’m so *excited*! Come out and meet us soon, okay?”

The discussion had thankfully resolved peacefully, and the unhatched ebirasornis now had a name: Suama. I glanced outside and was surprised to see that the sun was already starting to set. I didn’t know it at the time, but this moment ended up being the last bit of respite I would get for the rest of the day, because almost as soon as they had decided on a name, the twins began pleading with me to head to the nearest hardware store to buy some stuff for the egg. They wanted me to get an electric blanket to keep it warm, as well as an ultra-high capacity, 2400-kilowatt portable battery to power said blanket (that one really put a dent in my wallet), and last but not least, a thermometer. Thankfully, I managed to get all of it just before the store closed.



Once back in Ruffaltio again, I then had to carry all of that stuff—including the egg—up to the second floor of my shop so I could set it all up in an empty room. I wrapped the egg up in the electric blanket, plugged in the portable battery, then switched it on. But I wasn't done yet. I cleaned the room from top to bottom, then brought a futon from my own house to turn it into a temporary bedroom. This meant someone could stay in there and keep an eye on the egg, no matter the time of day (or night). And after spending the whole evening running around for the sake of some little monster that hadn't even hatched yet, I was finally able to get some rest.



Things didn't exactly go to plan, however. Some might say it just worked out that way, while others would put the blame on fate playing tricks on us. Either way, the next morning, while Aina and I were getting the shop ready for opening, we heard two shrill cries from the second floor and rushed upstairs. I opened the door to the makeshift bedroom I'd only just set up the day before and was confronted by the sight of my little sisters frozen in shock, their gazes fixed on the egg. It was moving.

"Bro, look! The egg..." Saori gasped, her face white as a sheet and pointing at the egg. "It suddenly started shaking on its own! Is it..." She hesitated. "Is it *giving birth*?!"

"Calm down, Saori," I said, trying to reassure her. "Also, eggs don't 'give birth.' They 'hatch.'"

"I *know* that!" she retorted before angrily grinding her heel into my foot. I couldn't help letting out a little yelp of pain.

"Are you okay, bro-bro?" Shiori asked me.

"I'm fine, Shiori-chan. Thanks for asking," I said with a little smile. "Anyway, when did the egg start moving?"

"I dunno. Maybe a few minutes ago?" Shiori replied. "Saorin and I heard this weird noise, and when we turned around, we saw it moving."

She told me that they'd been changing out of their pajamas and putting on their school uniforms, when all of a sudden, there was a noise in the room.

They'd looked around to see what was making it and noticed the egg shaking slightly. Who would have guessed that the egg we'd picked up only two days earlier would be hatching already? I had to admit, I would have liked a *little* more time to get everything ready for the arrival of the (jumbo-sized) fledgling—like looking up what kind of food I should be giving it, and stuff like that—but it seemed I wouldn't get that luxury.

"Shiorin! Does this mean the baby bird's coming out soon? Like, *now*?" Saori asked her sister, panicking slightly.

"I think so, yeah," Shiori replied, sounding as laid-back as always.

"Sh-Shouldn't we be doing something?" Saori said. "Like, getting some hot water and towels or, uh, something?"

"That's only for when women give birth, Saori," I gently reminded her.

While we were trying to calm Saori down, a crack appeared in the egg.

"Oh em gee, it's actually coming out!" Saori exclaimed.

"Stop panicking, Saorin," her sister chided her. "Here, let me take care of this."

Shiori gently pushed her sister aside and positioned herself in front of the egg with both of her arms extended and a kind smile on her face. As one, Saori, Aina, and I tilted our heads to one side in confusion at this display.

"Shiorin?"

"Shiori-chan?"

"Miss Shiori?"

After a few seconds, Saori made a sound of comprehension as she caught on to what her twin was up to. "She's trying to make the baby bird think she's its mom! It's that thing, you know? Wait, what's it called again? Impressing?"

"Who are you trying to impress, Saorin?" I teased. "I think the word you're looking for is 'imprinting.'"

"Yeah! That thing!" she exclaimed.

"Imprinting" is the biological phenomenon that occurs in fledglings where

their brains consider the first thing they see to be their “parent,” so by standing in front of the egg the way she was, Shiori was trying to make the chick think she was its mother.

“I’ve always wanted to own a bird,” Shiori said.

“Hey, Shiorin, no fair!” Saori objected. “I wanna be the baby bird’s mama!”

“But we look the same, Saorin, which means we would *both* be the baby bird’s mama,” Shiori said. “So let me just do this, yeah?”

“No way! I wanna be its mama!” Saori said, grabbing her sister’s arm in an attempt to pull her away from the egg.

“Saorin, let go of me!”

The two girls started squabbling over which of them would get to stand in front of the egg as it hatched.

“I’m not budging, Shiorin! It’s *my* egg! *I’m* the one who found it!” Saori declared.

“Well, that may be,” Shiori conceded. “But I paid your bill at that restaurant the other day, remember?”

“I only had a drink!” Saori protested. “It was literally 200 yen!”

“Yeah, but you still came up to me with your puppy dog eyes and asked me to pay for you!”

Okay, this was starting to get a bit ridiculous. Just then, a loud noise came from the egg. I instantly whipped my head around to look at it and noticed that an even bigger crack had formed. At the exact same moment, a couple of minutes of pushing and pulling each other ended with the twins losing their balance and toppling to the ground. With Shiori and Saori out of the picture, I found myself being the one standing directly in front of the egg. And of course, that was the exact moment the egg hatched.

“Kyupi!” the creature cried as it emerged from the egg, its eyes instantly locking with mine.

Aina, the twins, and I stared at it in complete silence.

“Kyupi!” the creature cried again.

It wasn’t a bird at all. The creature that had come out of the egg looked for all the world like a puppy.



“Uh, bro?”

“Bro-bro?”

“What is *that*?” the twins asked, both pointing at the dog(?) in front of us, before declaring, perfectly synchronized, “That’s not a bird.”

“No, it’s not,” I confirmed. The little doglike creature’s fur was matted with some sort of viscous fluid.

“Kyururu...” it whined as it looked around the room, before letting out another “Kyupi!” when it saw me again.

“Eek!” Saori squealed, jumping out of her skin.

Shiori sighed. “Oh, right. I forgot you were afraid of doggies, Saorin.”

“That stupid dog that used to chase me around when we were kids left me traumatized!” Saori moaned.

When she was little, Saori used to regularly get chased around the neighborhood by a large dog. It had probably only wanted to play, but its slobbery attention had been enough for Saori to develop a pretty intense fear of dogs. Ever since, she couldn’t even look at one without shuddering.

“We got scammed! *Scammed*, I tell ya!” Saori fumed. “Bro! Take this stinkin’ mutt to that burly guy with the scary face!”

Burly guy with the scary face? Was she talking about Barril?

“Hold on a minute, Saori,” I said. “When I said I was planning to sell the egg—well, I guess it’s not really an egg anymore, but you get the point—you were the one who stopped me and said you’d raise it yourself, weren’t you?”

“Uh, that’s...” she started, but I cut her off.

“And now that it’s hatched, and it turns out it *isn’t* an ebirasornis after all, you want to get rid of it? Don’t you think that’s kind of a jerk move?” I continued.

“Well, *maybe*, but...” she said before trailing off, clearly embarrassed.

“Now, I’m not saying we *should* actually raise this dog,” I added. “After all, we don’t even...”

“Um, Mister Shiro?” Aina said timidly, tugging at my sleeve.

“...know what it is. Yes, Aina?”

But she wasn’t looking at me. Her eyes were firmly fixed on the dog(?).

“I don’t think that’s a doggie,” she said.

“You don’t?” I asked.

“No. I think it’s a dragon,” she declared matter-of-factly.

“A dragon?” I repeated.

I took a good look at our new canine(?) companion and saw that there were indeed two things that looked like wings on its back. It seemed as though Aina might have been onto something.

“Yup. A dragon,” she confirmed.

“And by ‘dragon,’ you mean those fire-breathing creatures that tend to turn up a lot in the kinds of tales bards like to regale everyone with, yes?” I asked in an attempt to make sure we were on the same page here.

She nodded. “Yup.”

A dragon. I spent a good ten seconds processing this information, then took a deep breath and screamed “What the hell?!” at the top of my lungs, my cry of horror reverberating around the whole store.

Chapter Seven: Nice to Meet You, Little Dragon

Holy cow, it was a dragon.

I repeat: an *actual* motherflippin' dragon.

While I hadn't been born in this world, only coming here for the first time about six months ago, I knew one thing for sure: even out of all the various types of monsters in Ruffaltio, dragons were considered pretty dangerous. Pretty *damn* dangerous.

"Now that I'm taking a good look at it, it *does* kinda look like a dragon," I said thoughtfully as I washed the baby creature in a tub of warm water before grabbing a towel and wiping off the viscous liquid it was covered in. It responded by purring contentedly.

Oh, thank goodness, I thought as relief washed over me. *It looks like it's enjoying this.*

"Aina, can you go get me another towel?" I requested. "I have to dry this dragon off."

"Kay!" she replied before running out of the room, then returning a few seconds later with a fresh towel.

"Thanks," I said, taking it off her and wrapping it around the baby dragon before gently rubbing it up and down its body.

"Kyupi!"

By this point, the dragon was almost completely dry. *It really does look like a puppy*, I thought as I took another good look at it. It was covered all over in snow-white fur, and its eyes were so yellow, they were almost golden. But what puzzled me the most was the blue gemstone that seemed to be firmly affixed(?) to its forehead. I hadn't noticed it at first, probably because it had been hidden by wet fur, but now that the dragon was dry, the gemstone really stood out.

"Hey, Aina," I called out to get the little girl's attention.

“Hm? What is it, Mister Shiro?” she asked.

I picked up the dragon, turned it around so it was facing Aina, and pointed at the gem. “Do all dragons have gemstones on their foreheads?” I asked.

Aina thought about this for a moment. “I don’t think so. I’ve never heard of a dragon having a gemstone on its forehead before,” she said, tilting her head curiously to one side.

While Aina and I stared at the dragon, trying to figure out what this mysterious gemstone was, the twins were...

“Shiorin! Did you hear that? It’s a dragon! A *dragon*! That’s cool as hell!” Saori fizzed, pointing at the dragon.

“A dragon? Like the ones you get in video games?” Shiori asked, her eyes sparkling.

“Yeah! And in manga! Movies too!” Saori added. “And they’re always super strong!”

The two of them seemed incredibly excited about this development, but I guess that wasn’t a surprise. After all, they’d only just learned about this other world a couple of days ago, and they were already getting to see a real-life dragon. Even though Saori had been rooted to the spot with fear when the canine-like creature had emerged from the egg, she was much chirpier now that she knew it was a dragon rather than a dog. High school girls really could just adapt to any situation, couldn’t they?

“Dragons are so *cool*!” Shiori declared, marveling at the creature. “Oh, but I don’t like those dragons that look like lizards. I’m so glad this one’s a cute little fluffball!”

“I know, right?” Saori agreed. “Besides, we’re in another world! And what can be more ‘otherworldly’ than a dragon?”

“Exactly. Hey, you know what’d be even *cooler*? If we could make this dragon obey us! I mean, dragons are strong, right? We could be ruling over this world in no time!”

“Um, Shiorin, isn’t that going a bit, uh, far?”

“Saorin,” her sister replied. “There is nothing more important in life than power.”

Um, Shiori-chan, are you okay? Bro-bro’s getting a bit concerned about the words coming out of your mouth right now. I pondered for a second whether I should maybe intervene in my sisters’ conversation, but I ended up deciding against it, because for the time being at least, I needed to focus all of my attention on the dragon.

“Aina, could I ask you to tend the store for a while? I’m gonna head over to the Adventurers’ Guild for a bit to see what they say I should do with this little one here,” I said, patting the dragon on the head.

“Kay! You can count on me!” the little girl said, puffing her chest out with pride and giving me a determined nod.

“Thanks,” I replied with a smile. “I’ll head out now, then.”

But just as I was about to leave the room, the dragon warbled a cry and pounced at me.

“Eek!” I gasped.

Yikes! Is it attacking me? Did it get hungry and think I’d make a nice tasty snack? Am I about to be eaten alive?! The dragon brought its face closer until it was only inches from my own, and then...

...it started rubbing its soft, furry cheek against mine.

“Kyupipi!” it cried out happily as it nuzzled against me. It even started purring.

I couldn’t help letting out a confused “Buh?” at this unforeseen turn of events.

“The dragon thinks you’re its father, bro,” Saori said.

“Bro-bro became a papa!” Shiori agreed, a beaming smile spreading across her face.

Imprinting. This dragon has imprinted on me. No, wait, hold on a minute...

Yup, I’d become a dad. To a *dragon*.

“Kyurupi?” the dragon chirped, tilting its head to one side as it gazed at me,

almost like it was asking me what was wrong.

“Ah, um, I just have to head out for a bit, if that’s okay with you,” I attempted to explain to the baby dragon. “I’m sorry.” I tried to pull it off me, but things didn’t go exactly as planned.

“Kyupipi!”

“Holy...” I gasped. “It’s clinging on for dear life!”

No matter how much I tried to get the dragon to let go of me, it wouldn’t release me from its viselike grip.

“Saori! Shiori-chan! Can I get a little help over here?” I cried out in desperation.

“Kyupipi! Kurupi!” the dragon squawked, almost as if it was complaining.

“Yup, I was right. This little one definitely thinks you’re its papa, bro,” Saori said, which wasn’t really all that helpful to me right at that moment.

“Kyupi?”

“Bro-bro has a child now!” Shiori said gleefully.

“Shiori-chan, it is *not* my child!” I protested.

“Kyupi! Kyupi!”

“Aw, c’mon. Let go already!” I pleaded with the dragon, though unsurprisingly, my begging was ignored.

“Just give it up, bro,” Saori giggled.

“Kyupi!”

“Hear that? The dragon said you should give it up too,” Shiori translated.

“No way!” I retorted.

After teasing me some more, the twins finally agreed to help me out, and they successfully managed to separate me and the dragon.

“Kyupipipipi!” It immediately started wailing loudly, clearly distressed at the fact that it had been forced to let go of me.

I finally managed to make it out of the shop, leaving the baby dragon in the

care of Aina and the twins.

Chapter Eight: Giving Directions

“A baby dragon, huh?” I mused aloud while putting on my jacket as I made my way to the Adventurers’ Guild, though I’d only been walking for a few minutes when all of a sudden, I heard someone call out to me.

“Hey, you there!”

I instinctively turned around and saw that I’d been accosted by a figure in a cloak, their face hidden by its hood.

“Who, me?” I asked tentatively.

“Yes, you. I have a question for you,” the figure said, pulling their hood back ever so slightly.

I almost gasped at what I saw underneath. At first glance, I’d assumed this person must have been a man, since they were taller than me and the voice that had called out to me had been rather low and husky, but it turned out this cloaked figure was actually a woman, and an absolutely stunning one at that. Her hair was dark blue, aside from the left half of her bangs, which was white. I wondered how it came to be like that. Maybe she dyed it? But it was her eyes that immediately stood out to me, because they were bright red. Judging by her outfit, she was either a traveler or an adventurer, though that wasn’t an unusual sight on these streets. Ever since the Ninoritch branch of the Fairy’s Blessing guild had stumbled across ruins dating back to the Ancient Magic Civilization Era in the Gigheena Forest, adventurers from their other branches had been transferring to the town on a regular basis, lured here by the promise of countless treasures that lay as-yet undiscovered deep within the ruins. Was this pretty lady in front of me one of these adventurers? It was definitely a possibility, though I noted that she didn’t seem to be carrying a weapon of any description.

“Uh, sure. What did you want to know?” I asked. “Are you, uh, lost, perhaps?”

“Not exactly. I actually dropped something that’s very precious to me and I’m

searching for it. I hear tell that there are humes who make a living looking for lost items,” she said. “Do you know where exactly I might find one of these humes?”

“You dropped something, huh? In that case, I’d advise going to the town hall first,” I suggested.

“The town hall?” she repeated, as if these words were unfamiliar to her.

“Yes, the town hall.”

Whenever you lost something in Ninoritch, you had one of two options for retrieving it. The first option was to go to the Adventurers’ Guild and commission them for a search mission, though you’d usually only go to them when you were looking for a pet that had run away, or stuff like that. Search missions were bread and butter for novice adventurers, and it was their main source of income.

The other option was to go to the town hall. After all, Ninoritch was a pretty small town, and everyone here basically knew each other, so whenever someone found a lost item, in most cases, they would simply take it to the town hall where its rightful owner could easily retrieve it. In fact, that had actually happened to me a few days back. I’d accidentally dropped my old smartphone that barely worked while walking around the streets of Ninoritch, and no matter how much I’d searched for it, I couldn’t find it anywhere. And of course, I couldn’t have tried calling it from another cell phone and locating it by listening for its ringtone, because well, phones didn’t get signal in this world. Fortunately, Karen had come by a little later that same day and brought it back to me, telling me that someone had found it lying on the ground and taken it to the town hall.

“That’s where people usually take any lost objects they find,” I added by way of explanation.

“I see,” she said with a nod of understanding. “And where is that?”

“So if you just follow this road and turn right at the next corner, you’ll reach the center of town. The biggest building there is the town hall. Just talk to the receptionist there and if anyone’s brought in the thing you’ve lost, they’ll fetch it for you,” I explained.

The town hall wasn't too far, and it wasn't all that difficult to get there from here, so I figured she shouldn't get lost on the way. Hopefully.

"Noted. I'll try my luck there, then. I apologize for taking up your time. Have this as a symbol of my gratitude."

As soon as these words left her mouth, the pretty lady practically forced a large gem into my hands.

"What is this?" I asked, puzzled.

"You don't know?" she said, sounding surprised. "It's a red magic crystal. You humes consider them rather valuable, don't you?"

Yup, never heard of "red magic crystals" before. Sorry, ma'am. I made a mental note to ask someone what in the world they were.

"Um, you just said 'you humes,' didn't you? Does that mean you're not a hume yourself?" I inquired.

I had to admit, she looked like a hume in every way. But the way she was talking clearly indicated she wasn't one. Oh, wait! Maybe she had animal ears hiding under that hood? Preferably cat ears.

"Now that *is* a question. I might be. I might not be," she said evasively. "Anyway, I shall be on my way now."

And with that, she headed off in the direction of the town hall without even giving me time to respond.

"Aaand I forgot to give her back her crystal. Oh well. What can you do? I'd better hurry and get down to the guild," I muttered to myself as I turned around and headed in the opposite direction.

Chapter Nine: Asking Around

So I found this giant egg and a dragon hatched out of it...

Normally, I'd just go ask grandma what the hell I should do in this situation, but she was off doing who knows what, who knows where, so I figured I'd have to turn to someone else for help.

"Hey, man, you sure about this? Buying us lunch *and* booze, I mean?"

"Of course I am," I confirmed. "I actually wanted to get your opinion on something pretty complicated, so buying you lunch while we discuss it isn't all that big a deal."

"Really? Well, in that case, thanks, man. I'll take you up on your offer." The dashing adventurer opposite me held his empty cup aloft. "Hey, waitress! Bring us some more sake, would ya?"

Yup, that's right: I'd decided to ask my friends in the Blue Flash crew for their help in figuring out what to do with this baby dragon. At that particular moment, we were seated at a table in one corner of the guild's drinking hall, and I was grateful that we were tucked away there, because it meant as long as we were careful and didn't raise our voices too much, our conversation would stay secret. Besides, the drinking hall was as lively as always, so it'd be a (very unfortunate) miracle if anyone managed to overhear us with all the hubbub.

"We owe you so much, Shiro. Ask us whatever you want," Nesca the taciturn half-elf mage said to me. She was seated next to her boyfriend, Raiya, and stuffing her face with some chocolate I'd brought her as a little gift.

"Thank you, Nesca," I said. "You guys are the only people I know who I can really come to with this."

"Please, there is no need to thank us, Mr. Shiro, sir," Rolf the battle priest reassured me from the other end of the table. "As a priest, it is my duty to extend a helping hand to those in need. And more importantly, you are a friend of ours, Mr. Shiro. As Miss Nesca says, you may ask us anything you wish and

we shall endeavor to do our best to help you.” He was seated right in front of a window, and the light tumbling in from the outside made it look as though there was some sort of holy aura encircling his body, almost as if to emphasize just how virtuous he was.

“Exactly, meow!” Kilpha the cat-sith ranger piped up from my right. “We’re all friends here, meow. So feel free to tell us what’s on your mind.” She bumped shoulders with me, which I was sure was intended as a friendly gesture, but due to her insane strength, I was almost sent flying off my chair.

A few moments later, the waitress came over to our table, carrying plates full of food. “Here you are, guys and gals!” she announced with a grin as she set the food down on the table.

My companions had ordered so many dishes, there wasn’t a single centimeter of free space on the table when it had all been served up. And by “my companions,” I primarily meant Kilpha and Nesca, who’d ordered half the dishes on the menu *each* when they heard I was going to pay for the meal. And this was even before dessert had arrived. I was positive the second we finished up our meal, the waitress would come back over to our table with a bunch of convenience store snacks in her hands. Which, might I add, *I* was supplying to the guild.

“So anyway, what was it you wanted to talk to us about, man?” Raiya asked me, and I could see the other three also gazing at me with encouraging looks on their faces, as if to convey that they were all ears.

So I told them everything, starting with how the twins and I had stumbled upon a giant egg in the forest, and progressing on to our little visit to Barril, where he’d told us that it was an ebirasornis egg. Of course, this had turned out not to be the case, as instead of a bird hatching out of the egg, a baby dragon who seemingly thought I was its parent had emerged. I didn’t leave out a single detail, including how fussy the baby dragon had been when I’d left the store to head over here, which I’d thought was kind of cute, though a little annoying. I concluded my tale by informing them that the baby dragon was still in my shop, and I wasn’t really sure what to do with it, hence why I needed their help.

Needless to say, by the time I’d finished my story, everyone around the table

was in a state of deep shock. Nesca had dropped her fork, Kilpha's jaw was on the floor, and a deep crease had appeared on the brow of the always-smiling and serene Rolf. But Raiya's reaction had been the most extreme. See, like the others, he'd been eating when I'd told them about the dragon, and well, suffice to say, he must have been pretty shaken by the news. So much so, in fact, the mouthful of food he'd just shoveled in ended up being spat out with such force, it hit me square in the face, leaving me covered in a slimy paste of half-chewed food that I could feel dripping down my neck and onto my jacket. *Guess I'll have to get it dry-cleaned.*

"C-Crap! Sorry about that, man!" Raiya said quickly.

"No worries. It was my fault. After all, I was the one who insisted you guys listen to my issues," I reassured him as I wiped the goo off with my handkerchief.

Raiya shot me an apologetic look before quickly glancing around the drinking hall to make sure no one was listening in on our conversation. "Dude, so there's seriously a dragon in your store *right now*?" he asked me in a low voice.

"Yeah," I confirmed. "That's why I'm here. I have no idea what to do with it."

"Makes sense," Raiya admitted, scratching his head. I'd noticed recently that he often did this whenever he got embarrassed or was unsure what to do. "Nesca, what do you think he should do?" he said, turning to his girlfriend.

Nesca was incredibly knowledgeable, and so too was Rolf. In most of the situations we found ourselves in, the two of them basically acted as teachers to the rest of us. As a priest, Rolf knew a great deal about the history of the Giruam Kingdom and the religious beliefs of its citizens, plus he was extremely well-versed in foreign affairs. On top of that, he was a skilled negotiator, which saw him handling all of the discussions between Blue Flash and their clients.

For her part, Nesca had studied at the Magic Academy for several years, which made her the group's undisputed expert on all things magic. Not only could she recite all sorts of spells and chants, she was also very knowledgeable when it came to the different races that inhabited this world, including divine creatures, mythical beasts, and—yup, you guessed it—dragons. It came as no surprise that Raiya had instantly turned to her for advice on how to deal with

my baby dragon problem.

“You should take it back to the forest,” Nesca declared without a hint of hesitation. “Dragons are difficult creatures to raise, which is why dragon tamers exist. There’s no way you’ll be able to raise it by yourself, Shiro. You’re just a merchant.”

“Yeah, that’s pretty much the answer I was expecting,” I said dejectedly. If a veteran adventurer like Nesca was telling me I should return the dragon to the forest, I probably didn’t have much choice. I couldn’t help a sigh escaping my lips.

“Mr. Shiro, sir, while it may still be a baby at the moment, dragons are deadly creatures,” Rolf said, explaining Nesca’s reasoning. “Suppose something happened and it started running wild: only an adventuring party ranked gold or higher would be able to overcome the beast. For the sake of the safety of everyone in this town, it would be wiser for you to return the dragon to the forest to avoid any incidents of that kind occurring.”

“You shouldn’t get attached to a monster, Shiro,” Nesca added. “Monsters and people are just too different. They can’t live among us. They have different needs.”

“I understand,” I said quietly.

“Sooner or later, you’re going to have to say goodbye to that dragon,” she continued. “And the longer you put it off, the harder it’ll be for you to let it go. You should take the dragon back into the forest. Now.”

They were right, of course. Me raising this dragon would basically be the same as handing a bunch of explosives to some random person in the street: there was no way of knowing when they would blow up and wipe the town off the map. I saw where they were coming from—I really did—but...

“Kyupipi! Kurupi!” the dragon squawked, almost as if it was complaining.

“Yup, I was right. This little one definitely thinks you’re its papa, bro,” Saori said, which wasn’t really all that helpful to me right at that moment.

“Kyupi?”

“Bro-bro has a child now!” Shiori said gleefully.

“Shiori-chan, it is not my child!” I protested.

“Kyupi! Kyupi!”

“Aw, c’mon. Let go already!” I pleaded with the dragon, though unsurprisingly, my begging was ignored.

“Just give it up, bro,” Saori giggled.

“Kyupi!”

“Hear that? The dragon said you should give it up too,” Shiori translated.

For some reason, the second Nesca had said those words, I suddenly recalled how the little dragon had started crying when I left the shop earlier.

“So I’ll have to say goodbye to the little guy, huh?” I mumbled.

Kilpha patted me on the back in what I could only assume was an attempt to comfort me. “I’m not super smart like Nesca, but I agree with her. If you picked that egg up in the forest, then you should take the dragon back there, meow,” she said.

Take the dragon back to the forest, huh? But there were so many monsters there. Would it even survive? It might have been a dragon, but it was still a baby. Besides, how would it feed itself? There was no way it could make it on its own.

“I don’t think I should release it into the forest *right away*,” I said. “Look, I know I came to you guys for advice, but don’t you think we could maybe find some other temporary—”

The word I was about to say was “solution,” but just then, a voice interrupted me.

< I hear you! >

“Wh-Who said that?!” Raiya gasped, peering all around to find where the voice was coming from.

< I have a genius idea to solve your little problem, mister! >

Mister?

“Wait. *Emille?!?*” I exclaimed.

“Emi?!?” Raiya uttered. “Where the hell is she?!?”

“Miss Emille overheard our conversation?” Rolf said. “That does not bode well.”

All five of us stood up at once, our chairs scraping loudly across the floor. I looked around but could see no sign of Emille in the immediate vicinity. I glanced across at the reception desk, but the only person standing behind it appeared to be the new hire, who looked on the verge of tears for some reason. I then inspected all the faces at the surrounding tables, but Emille was nowhere to be seen. Where the hell *was* she?!

I heard her chuckle.

< I am currently talking straight to your heart, mister. >

“My heart?” I said, confused.

“Thought transference!” Nesca gasped, bringing a hand up to her mouth in shock.

“Thought transference?” I repeated dumbly.

“It’s a form of magic that allows you to communicate with someone through thought alone,” she explained. “It’s an extremely difficult technique to master. And you need magic on par with a sorcerer to be able to use it. I had no idea Emi was so powerful...”

“What?! *Emille* can do that?!?” I gasped, gawking at Nesca.

< It’s all thanks to our special bond, mister! > Emille chirruped from who knew where. *< I can talk to you, even when I’m not nearby! It’s the power of love! >*

She paused slightly and gulped down a few ragged lungfuls of air before continuing. *< I’m in love with you, and you’re in love with me, mister! My body and soul belong to you! And naturally, all of your money belongs to me! >*

Kilpha prodded me in the arm repeatedly, and when I shot a quizzical look at her, she simply jerked her head in the direction of the window behind Rolf,

through which a pair of bunny ears could be seen standing proudly to attention.

< Mister, you and I will be so happy together! You get a cute wife, and I get your entire fortune! >

Every time Emille said something, the bunny ears jiggled in time with her words.

< And once we're married, you and I will leave town, mister. We'll move to the royal capital and buy a beautiful white house. No, wait, a mansion! A huuuge mansion! It'll be so magnificent, it'll put even the residences of the most prominent noble families to shame! >

The Blue Flash crew and I remained totally silent throughout this little speech, and we simply stared blankly at the bunny ears that were wiggling about on the other side of the glass.

< And of course, we'll have lots of servants. A hundred, at least! And all of them will be pretty boys! Oh, but we can throw in a few more mature men too. I don't mind. Naturally, they'll have to refer to me as 'Madam.' I can already picture their beautiful faces blushing while calling out to me! >

After a little while of this, Raiya wordlessly turned toward the window and drew his foot back.

< All of them will be head over heels for me! They will say that my magnificence rivals even that of Assia, the goddess of beauty! A forbidden romance between servant and mistress... Ah, I can already—Eek! >

Raiya delivered an almighty kick to the wall just beneath the window, cutting Emille short in the middle of her monologue. She jumped in shock and our eyes met through the glass. She instantly stiffened, looking like a deer in headlights.

"Emi, come here," Nesca ordered. She sounded less than amused by her antics.

Emille nodded vigorously. *< A-All right! I'll be right there! >*





And so, there we were in the drinking hall with Emille standing in front of us, my comrades asking her why the *hell* she'd been listening in on our conversation, to which she replied that she had been pulling up grass from underneath the window for her lunch when she overheard us through the wall, thanks to her superior bunny hearing. Oh, and if you're wondering why in the world she was eating grass instead of a proper meal, it was because she'd already spent every last coin of her salary that month and couldn't afford food, so she'd found herself having to get creative in order to fill her belly. She alternated between eating wild grass, stealing the new receptionist's lunch, and using her womanly charms to get naive new arrivals to treat her to dinner. And while it might have been Emille we were talking about here, I still couldn't help feeling a little sorry for her after listening to this sob story, so I ended up begrudgingly offering to buy her lunch. Very, very begrudgingly.

"Thank you ever so much, mister!" she said in a singsong voice as she took a seat at our table. I could almost hear the heart shapes punctuating her sentence.

"What a truly benevolent heart you have!" she continued, laying it on thick. "Unlike a certain *cheapskate* of a GM who won't even spare a single copper coin for her poor, hardworking receptionist."

"You should probably choose your words a bit more carefully," I suggested. "What if Ney heard you saying that?"

Emille giggled. "Oh, but she won't, so there's no need to worry about that!" She tittered again and started stuffing her face at impressive speed. "She's currently..." —*munch munch*—"...in the middle of the forest..." —*munch munch*—"...and she won't be back for a while." —*munch munch, gulp*—"So there's nothing for me to be afraid of!"

"Really? Ney's out in the forest? It's pretty rare for the guildmaster to head out on a quest, isn't it?" I asked.

"It is," Emille said with a nod. "But a few adventurers found some super valuable stuff in the ruins, so she decided she'd go retrieve it all herself. She left a few days ago."

Ney Mirage was the guildmaster of the Ninoritch branch of the Fairy's Blessing guild. A couple of months back, she had revealed to me that she possessed a Storage Pouch, a special item in the shape of a tiny bag that allowed her to transport the equivalent of several cartloads of goods. It sounded as though when she'd learned about the valuables the adventurers had found in the ruins, she had decided to head there herself to help them transport all of it back to Ninoritch.

"She also said she was planning to lead an expedition around the forest too," Emille added with a huge grin on her face. "So she won't be back for another two weeks!"

Emille seemed extremely happy about this news, which wasn't all that surprising. After all, with Ney out in the forest, Emille was free to get up to whatever mischief she pleased.

"Your little boss went with her too, man," Raiya informed me.

"Oh, so *that's* what she was talking about when she said she'd be busy showing adventurers around the forest and wouldn't be back for a while."

Yup, you heard right. I had a "boss." Her name was Patty Falulu, and she was a fairy, one of the rarest creatures in Ruffaltio. Since she'd been born and raised in Gigheena Forest, it went without saying that Patty knew the terrain much better than any of the guild's adventurers. She was the best possible guide you could hope for if you were undertaking a mission like that.

"Well, I'm sure Patty will keep them safe. After all, she saved me when I got separated from you guys in the forest," I said, referring to the time that I'd ended up being swept downriver after joining the Blue Flash crew on a quest to pick some rare flowers.

"True, but aren't you even a little sad that our GM has stolen her away from you? After all, you *are* her underling, right?" Raiya teased.

"Nah, it's fine. Aina's a bit down about it, though. She really does love Patty. She didn't actually say anything about it, but I could tell by her face that she's hoping Patty comes back soon, and—" But I didn't get to finish my sentence because Emille cut me off.

“Oh *please* no! I’m so not looking forward to them getting back. I wanna keep my freedom!” she said, slamming her now-empty tankard—which had been filled to the brim with sake only seconds before—down on the table. “I *love* being free! I mean, look at me right now! I currently have no work to do, and that’s because no one’s here to stop me from delegating all of my tasks to the newbie.” She pointed to the new receptionist behind the desk before clambering up onto the table and standing tall on it. “We should all celebrate my temporary freedom!” she declared, spreading her arms wide with a blissful smile plastered across her face and looking down at us with an expectant glint in her eye. The reaction she got wasn’t the one she’d been hoping for, however.

“I don’t often come across people as sleazy as you, Emille,” I reflected. “It’s almost refreshing, in a way.”

“You’re a no-good piece of trash, meow!” Kilpha said.

“Disgusting behavior,” Nesca added.

“One day, you will be made to repent for your sins, Miss Emille, ma’am,” Rolf warned her.

Raiya didn’t say anything, because he was too busy laughing his head off.



“So, Emille, what was this ‘genius idea’ you mentioned earlier?” I asked once she was finally done eating her fill. I’d decided to let her enjoy her meal before firing questions at her. But Emille simply blinked at me with bleary eyes.

“Huh? What are you talking about?” she asked.

I was so taken aback, I almost fell off my chair.

“*You* know...” I said, lowering my voice and glancing around the drinking hall to make sure no one was listening in. “About that dragon I found.”

“Oh, *that*!” Emille exclaimed. “The baby dragon! Of course!” She chuckled. “I know *exactly* what you should do.”

“You sound very confident,” I noted. “So? What do you suggest?”

The blissful smile that had been splashed across her face since I’d offered to pay for her food was instantly replaced by a much more serious expression.

“Before I tell you that, I have a question for you,” she said. “When Raiya and the others told you to take the dragon back to the forest, you didn’t seem convinced you should. Why was that?”

“I...” I started, but I had to concede she was right. “Yeah, I wasn’t. I just thought, well, it’s only a baby, you know? I’m worried that if we release it into the forest just like that, it might get killed by another monster.”

“That’s what I thought. After all, you and I are deeply in love with each other, mister. I always know *exactly* what you’re thinking,” she said, nodding gravely with her eyes closed. “But rest assured. As your future wife, I have the perfect solution to your problem!”

Her eyes shot open again and I could almost see the gold coins she was picturing in her mind through her eyeballs.

“You should sell the baby dragon,” she declared.

“Sell it?” I repeated.

“Yes! There’s a country that will give you thousands of gold coins for a young dragon!” she informed me.

“Do you speak of Krop, Miss Emille, ma’am?” Rolf inquired.

“Yes! That’s the place!” she confirmed.

Rolf hummed. “I see. Your supposition is, in all probability, correct. The people of that nation would likely pay handsomely for a dragon hatchling, and would also know how to raise it.”

“You should maybe explain to Shiro in more detail why it’s such a good idea, Rolf,” Raiya interjected. “I’m pretty sure he won’t be super familiar with Krop. Are you, man?” he said, turning to me.

“You’ve got that right,” I confirmed. “Sorry to be a pain, Rolf, but could you tell me a little more about this country? Krop, was it?”

“Of course,” Rolf said. “Krop is a small nation located in the southern part of the continent. Despite its size, it has one of the strongest armies in the world, thanks to its Order of Dragon Knights, which as the name suggests, is composed exclusively of dragon riders. Even the continent’s major superpowers fear their

might.”

“Meow! That’s so cool, meow!” Kilpha piped up.

Rolf nodded. “And this is the part that will be of most interest to you: *someone* needs to raise those dragons in order for soldiers to ride them into battle. As such, we can safely assume that there are dragon tamers in Krop. Dragon tamers, as the name suggests, are experts at raising and training dragons. They would know the correct way to take care of the hatchling you’ve found, Mr. Shiro, sir.”

“I heard that if you take a baby dragon to Krop, they give you a title and some land!” Emille piped up. “Hear that, mister? You can become a noble *and* have your own domain! And as your future wife, I’d get to live in the lap of luxury, thanks to all of the money we’d be squeezing out of our vassals, and—*mmph!*”

“Yeah, yeah, we get it. Shut up now, meow.”

Kilpha had seemingly gotten tired of Emille’s endless rambling and slapped both of her hands over the bunny girl’s mouth, effectively silencing her. Though on second glance, I noticed that one of her hands wasn’t covering Emille’s mouth at all, but her nose. Had she gotten so fed up with Emille that she planned on murdering her right here in the drinking hall in broad daylight?

“Don’t worry. I’ll make sure she won’t interrupt you guys again. You can continue with your conversation, meow,” Kilpha said as Emille thrashed around beside her, the bunny girl’s protests muffled by the cat-sith’s hands.

“Thank you, Kilpha. I like your idea, Rolf,” I said, trying my best to ignore Emille’s flailing limbs. “I think I might go down that route.”

Chapter Ten: A Perfect Plan

I'd made up my mind: I was going to take the baby dragon to Krop and entrust it to a dragon tamer. But before all of that, Raiya had a request.

"Hey, man. Could we see this baby dragon before you give it up?" he asked.

I didn't see anything wrong with the suggestion, so I said it was fine and we headed off in the direction of my shop. I took the lead, with Raiya and Nesca following behind, arms linked, and Kilpha and Rolf bringing up the rear. And for some reason...

"Um, Emille?"

"Yes?"

"Why are you coming with us?" I asked.

Yup, that's right. Emille had decided to tag along. She was nonchalantly walking next to me, humming a little song.

"What do you mean? I'm coming to see the baby dragon, of course!" she declared as if it should have been blindingly obvious.

"I-I can see that. But, um, you really don't have to—"

I didn't reach the end of my sentence due to being cut off by a shrill cry from Emille.

"*What?! Mister!*" she retorted, looking horrified at my audacity. "It was *my* idea to sell the baby dragon, and you're refusing to let me even see it?!"

"No, that's not what—" I attempted to explain, but Emille cut across me again.

"You're a *monster*, mister! I spent a superlong time racking my brain to come up with a solution to your problem, and you're not even the slightest bit appreciative!"

"I already told you that wasn't the issue. I simply—"

“Hmph! Hmmmph!” she humphed. “Well, I don’t *care* anymore! If you were planning on asking the guild to help you transport the dragon to Krop, you can shove it! I’ll *never* allow it now! Hmph!” She puffed out her cheeks angrily and made a show of whipping her head away from me.

“Will you listen to what I’m actually saying?” I said in an exasperated tone. “All I meant was—”

“I can’t hear you! I can’t hear you, la-la-la!” she started singing as she covered her ears.

This damn bunny was dead set on ignoring me. But I seemingly wasn’t the only one losing patience with her bratty attitude. Kilpha let out an indignant “Meow!” and delivered a strong slap to the back of Emille’s head.

“Ouch! That *hurt*, Kilpha! Don’t hit me out of the blue like that, you big meanie!” Emille whined.

“I wouldn’t have to if you’d just listen to Shiro, meow! You brought it on yourself, meow!” Kilpha said, ending her sentence with a little “Hmph!” of her own.

“Kilpha’s right,” Nesca said, nodding.

“Miss Emille, ma’am, I believe Mr. Shiro is simply afraid that you coming with us in the middle of your work day might cause problems for you down the line,” explained Rolf, who had been watching the scene unfold.

“Exactly, Rolf!” I piped up. “I’m just worried about you, Emille. Ney’s gonna give you a real tongue-lashing if she finds out.”

“Oh, *puh*-lease! I already have that covered. I told Trell you requested I come with you,” she said.

“Oh, did you now? That’s funny, I don’t ever remember requesting anything like that,” I said, somewhat indignantly.

Trell was the other receptionist at the Fairy’s Blessing guild. She’d only been hired two months ago, but she was already well-liked by all the adventurers—men and women alike—due to her bright smile and kind demeanor. Emille didn’t like that one bit and she treated the poor girl worse than garbage.

“Who cares what the *actual* truth is? All I have to do is mention your name and then no one can complain about me leaving in the middle of the day. Especially not *that* little brat,” Emille said with a devilish smile. “You’re one of the guild’s most valued business partners, after all! Besides, I’ve been working at the guild far longer than she has. Newbies don’t need to say anything other than ‘Yes, ma’am!’ ‘Understood!’ and ‘Thank you!’ when spoken to. *Everyone* knows that!”

What the hell? She was making it sound like I had used my position as the guild’s business partner to *force* Emille to accompany me during the middle of her shift. And it seemed as though I wasn’t the only one displeased with her attitude.

“Hm? Why’s everyone looking so sullen? What’s wrong?” Emille asked the group.

No one said a word.

“Rolf? Wh-Why are you taking out your mace?!” Emille gasped. “You can’t hit me with that thing, you hear? That’d *seriously* hurt! You wouldn’t dare hit a cute, fragile girl like me, would you? I mean, I’d literally *die*! In a single hit!”

“Meow.”

“Kilpha? Don’t pull out your daggers! Sh-Sharp tools are a big no-no too! You hear me? Eep!”

It took me a while to get the Blue Flash crew to calm down again—especially Rolf and Kilpha—but once I’d made Emille promise she would go straight back to work once she’d seen the baby dragon, I decided I’d let her off the hook this once and allow her to tag along with us.



The “Temporarily Closed” sign I’d put on the door greeted me when we arrived at my shop. We all stepped inside and Raiya immediately started peering around the place.

“So where’s this baby dragon?” he asked when he couldn’t find what he was looking for.

“Up on the second floor. This way,” I said, and I led our little group upstairs.

I knocked on the door to the makeshift bedroom where I’d housed the little dragon for the time being and pushed it open.

“I’m back!” I announced, and practically as soon as I stepped into the room, a small silhouette flung itself at me. “Oof!”

A quick glance at the figure told me it was a little girl who must have been about three or four years old, and who was stark naked. Her hair was silky white, and a huge smile blossomed on her face as she wrapped her little arms around my neck and rubbed her cheek against mine.

“So cute,” Nesca cooed. “Can I hold her?”

“She seems extremely close to you,” Rolf noted. “Could she be your daughter, perhaps?”

Raiya shot me a cheeky grin. “Well, she sure as hell seems to like you. I got it wrong last time with Aina, but this one *has* to be your kid, right? Ah, I’m so jealous!”

Kilpha gasped audibly. “I can’t believe you have a daughter, Shiro, meow!”

Emille let out a gasp too, albeit a much louder one than Kilpha. “I can’t believe you have a daughter, mister!” she said, echoing Kilpha almost word for word.

Half the Blue Flash crew plus Emille watched on with affection as the little girl hugged me tight, while the other half seemed in total shock. They all seemed to be under the impression that this kid was my daughter.

“She’s not my child,” I told them. “In fact, I have no idea who she is. Plus, what is she even doing here in the first place? And where are her clothes?!” I turned to Saori, who was sitting in one corner of the room. “Saori, could you please tell me what the hell is going on here? Who *is* this kid?!”

But Saori didn’t answer. She had a blank look on her face, and her eyes were as wide as saucers.

“Saori?” I tried again, but she remained silent.

Okay, let’s try the other twin.

“Shiori-chan, do you know who this girl is?”

But Shiori didn't reply either. Like Saori, she was frozen in shock and completely unresponsive. It reminded me of when the two of them had discovered the portal a couple of days before. Well, since the twins were seemingly of no help, I decided to turn to Aina for answers.

“Aina, is this a friend of yours?” I asked the little girl. It was the most plausible explanation, since Aina was a citizen of Ninoritch, after all. She might have just brought a friend over.

But the little girl simply shook her head. “Nope.”

“Really? Then how did she get here?” I wondered aloud.

It was then that I realized there was something else wrong with this scene. *Something* was missing in the room.

“Aina...” I said slowly. “Where's the baby dragon?”

Yup, that's right. The baby dragon was nowhere to be seen.

“Um, it's there,” Aina said, pointing to the child in my arms.

I was speechless.

No way. There's no way that can be true.

“Saori. Hey, Saori!” I said, raising my voice to get my little sister's attention.

“Hm? Oh. It's you, bro,” she said blankly.

“Saori, where's the baby dragon?” I asked her, sounding somewhat insistent.

She wordlessly raised her hand and pointed at—yup, you guessed it—the little girl in my arms, just like Aina had done.

This is a prank, right? The twins and Aina are just trying to trick me, right?

“Sh-Shiori-chan! You must know where the baby dragon is, right?! You're the one who named it, after all. Can you tell your bro-bro where it is?” I asked my other sister, and I sounded like I was on the verge of losing my sanity by this point.

I hoped beyond hope that Shiori would tell me this was all a joke. But alas, my

prayers went unanswered.

“That little girl hanging from your neck...” Shiori said quietly. “She’s the baby dragon, bro-bro.”

I’d asked all three of them where the dragon was, and they had all given me the same answer.

“Are you freaking kidding me?” I mumbled in utter shock, with the little girl still dangling from my neck.

Chapter Eleven: Suama

The dragon had turned into a human. Shiori, Saori, *and* Aina had all told me that was what had happened. If it'd been just my little sisters saying it, I would've laughed it off as a joke, but with Aina backing them up, also adamant that the baby dragon had turned into a little girl in front of their very eyes, I had to accept it was the truth.

"A dragon turning into a person? Is that even a thing?" I said, turning to the Blue Flash crew as I wrapped the little girl—who was still happily cooing at me—in a white button-down shirt I had lying around. I couldn't let the poor thing run around naked, after all.

After almost a full ten seconds of silence, Nesca nodded and stated, "It is."

For real? Damn, fantasy worlds are something else!

"There are many legends and folktales that tell of dragons assuming humanoid form," Nesca continued. "There were also quite a few books at the Magic Academy that mentioned similar stories."

Kilpha made a noise that was part-rumination, part-meowing. "What exactly did those books say, Nesca, meow?" she asked, tilting her head to one side curiously.

Nesca cleared her throat before answering. "They detailed instances of adult dragons learning to speak and even cast spells, including ones related to transformation magic."

"That puts me in mind of a legend I heard once from the great country in the west. Many centuries ago, a dragon fell in love with the queen of that nation, and became so infatuated with her, it assumed humanoid form so that it could propose to her," Rolf said, backing up what Nesca had read.

Transformation magic, huh? Wasn't that the same thing grandma used?

"I've heard that legend too," Nesca said. "There are hundreds of similar tales, not just from the great country in the west, but from all across the world."

She paused, then continued her train of thought. “However, all of the dragons in those stories were mature dragons, and highly powerful ones at that,” she noted, looking at the little girl—or rather, the baby dragon—still clinging to me. “I’ve never heard of a young dragon, much less a *hatchling*, using that type of magic before.”

“So this kid isn’t your run-of-the-mill dragon, then? Is that what you’re trying to say?” I asked.

Nesca nodded. “As I said, I’ve never heard of a dragon hatchling using magic before. But perhaps hatchlings sired by the most powerful dragons can? All I can say for sure is this creature you’ve found must be from an incredibly rare—perhaps even legendary—subspecies of dragon.”

Everyone in the room gasped as these words were spoken. Well, *nearly* everyone, because Shiori and Saori clearly had no clue what any of it meant, the whole conversation flying straight over their heads.

“This hatchling turning into a person is most likely a form of mimicry,” Nesca continued. “The creature must have unconsciously tried to copy the form of the people in its vicinity in order to hide among them.”

So basically, there were adult dragons out there who could take on humanoid form. It was rare, but not unheard of. A dragon *hatchling* being able to do so, on the other hand, was entirely new.

Good grief. First, I was rescued by a fairy, one of the rarest creatures in all of Ruffaltio, and now I’d accidentally become the “father” of an extremely rare type of dragon? What kind of insane luck was that?



It took a few minutes for all of us to digest this news.

“So are you still planning on selling this little dragon girlie, man?” Raiya asked me once we’d all more or less regained our composure, but before I could even open my mouth, Saori butted in.

“What’s that? ‘Selling’? What’s he talking about, bro?!”

“You’re not really gonna sell cute little Suama, are you, bro-bro?” Shiori piped

up. They were both staring daggers at me.

“Wait a second, Shiori-chan,” I said. “What did you just say?”

“I said: ‘You’re not really gonna sell her, are you, bro-bro?’”

“No, I mean, what did you call her?”

“Cute little Suama?”

“That there!” I said. “Are we *seriously* naming her Suama?”

“Yeah? I mean, that’s the name we decided on when she was still in the egg,” Shiori pointed out.

“So you still wanna go with that, even though she looks like *this*?” I asked, gesturing toward the little girl who was still dangling from my neck.

“Of course! From now on, her name is Suama!” Shiori declared, her gaze shifting to the baby-dragon-turned-little-girl.

“Hey! I’m not done with you yet, bro!” Saori piped up. “What do you mean you’re planning on selling Suama?!” she asked for a second time.

I took Suama by the waist and gently lowered her to the floor. She beamed up at me and let out a high-pitched coo. It was clear she trusted me implicitly, just like any child would their parent.

“There, there. Everything’s all right, Suama,” I said, smiling back at her and patting her tenderly on the head.

I had planned on selling the little hatchling to a dragon tamer in Krop, but the moment I saw the way she smiled at me, I realized there was no way I could bring myself to do that, so I figured I should hold off on making any decisions until grandma got back. She would definitely know what to do with the little mite. I opened my mouth to inform everyone of the new plan, but I wasn’t quick enough.

“Of *course* we’re gonna sell the baby dragon!” Emille said happily. “I mean, it can turn into a *person*! That’s *incredible*! Can you imagine how much money we might make off this little thing?! Maybe even enough to buy a whole *country*!” she trilled, her eyes sparkling madly.

The twins stared at her in total bewilderment, then turned to me.

“Bro-bro, who’s the lady with the bunny ears?” Shiori asked.

“I have no idea,” I lied, waving my hands around in front of me for emphasis.

“Aw, c’mon, mister. Don’t be shy!” Emille said in a sugary-sweet voice before declaring to the twins, “I’m Shiro’s fiancée! And once we’ve sold this baby dragon, we’re going to buy a castle in the capital and move there! I’m so looking forward to our life as newlyweds, *darling*!” As always, I could almost hear the heart shapes lingering in the air after each sentence.

“What?! Your *fiancée*? Bro, what’s going on here?!” Saori exclaimed, gawking at me.

“Bro-bro’s fiancée? But what about Alice-san?” Shiori pouted.

“Girls, I’m telling you, I have no idea who this lunatic is,” I reiterated, waving my hands about in front of me again.

“Mister! How *heartless* of you!” Emille squawked huffily. “Have you just been toying with me all along?!”

“I’ve *never* ‘toyed’ with you, Emille,” I objected.

“Oh, hush up! You men always say the same thing,” she scoffed.

Saori pointed an accusatory finger at me. “Hold on. So you *do* know her, bro!”

“No, no, I don’t,” I said for the third time, flapping my hands around again.

Shiori puffed out her cheeks in frustration. “Which is it, bro-bro? Do you know her or not? And if she really is your fiancée, you should be telling her off! She wants to sell Suama!”

“Listen, lady, I don’t know what kind of relationship you have with my brother, but I won’t let you lay a finger on Suama, you hear?” Saori declared, and she stepped in front of the little dragon girl to protect her, then balled up her fists and assumed a fighting stance. She was ready to brawl with Emille if she so much as took one step toward Suama.

“You’d better hand over that baby dragon right now, little girl!” Emille snarled. “This little one’s gonna make me rich! My entire future is riding on this

deal!”

“This lady sounds like a bad person, Saorin,” Shiori piped up.

“Yup. She’s a mean, evil bunny lady!” Saori agreed.

“Hey, that’s rude!” Emille chided them before pointing a finger at the pair and turning to me. “Hey, mister, who are these two brats, anyway? Tell them to get outta here this instant!”

“They’re my little sisters,” I said flatly.

“Your little sisters?” Emille repeated dumbly.

“Yeah. My little sisters.”

“That’s right!” Saori piped up. “I’m Saori, bro’s little sister! And this is...” Saori trailed off and pointed at Shiori to finish the sentence.

“Shiori. I’m Saorin’s twin, and bro-bro’s little sister,” Shiori said.

On hearing that these two girls were my sisters, Emille started panicking slightly. “M-Mister, are they telling the truth?” she asked me.

“They are. They’re my darling little sisters,” I confirmed.

“And we won’t hand bro over to a big meanie like you who wants to sell poor little Suama!” Saori told the bunny girl.

“Exactly,” Shiori confirmed with a nod. “If you wanna marry bro-bro, you’re gonna need our blessing first.”

The twins clearly didn’t like Emille one bit.

“Mister’s little sisters...” Emille mumbled, her jaw on the floor. Her eyes darted from me to the twins and back again several times. “So if I manage to get in their good books, my dreams of marrying him will be...” she muttered to herself, tittering at the genius of her brilliant master plan. All of a sudden, she pointed an accusatory finger at me and furrowed her brow. “We can’t sell the baby dragon, mister!”

Well, well. Would you look at that! Her tune had changed completely.

“You need to...” she started, then decided she needed to raise her voice even more to get her point across. “You need to wake up, mister! This is a *baby*

dragon! What kind of monster would even *dream* of selling such a teeny tiny little darling to a dragon tamer?! The poor thing! You absolutely *cannot* do that!” she lectured me, spittle spraying from her lips with each word. “Listen. I have an idea, mister. If you and I get married, we can raise this little one as our daughter! So come on, let’s get married! Right now!”

Everyone stared at her in sheer amazement at her ability to do a complete one-eighty at the drop of a hat.



We continued to chat for a little while, and before long, Suama fell asleep. I watched as she went over to the sofa to lie down, and the second her head hit the cushion, she was out like a light.

“So a shape-shifting dragon, huh? And here I was, thinking living out in the country would mean a nice, quiet life, but all this crazy stuff just seems to keep happening recently,” Raiya grumbled, his gaze fixed on Suama’s sleeping form.

“Hm? What do you mean by that?” I asked, wondering what he meant by “crazy stuff.”

“Well, y’know...” Raiya said evasively. “Just stuff.”

I noticed he kept glancing at Aina out of the corner of his eye. *Oh, I get it.*

“Hey, Aina,” I called out to the little girl. “Could you go buy some clothes for Suama, please?”

“Um, sure,” she said, though she looked a little confused by my request.

“Thanks. Hm, let’s see... Ideally, I’d like you to get her a few days’ worth of clothes, but that might be a little hard for you to carry on your own, huh?” I said, smoothly transitioning to the second part of my plan to get the younger ones out of the shop for a bit. “Saori, could you go with her?”

“Ugh, do I *have* to?” Saori grumbled, rolling her eyes. “Okay, fine. But only if you give me some spending money.”

I nonchalantly turned to my other sister. “Shiori-chan, could you go instead? Saori said she’d rather stay here.”

“Sure thing! I’ll go with Aina to pick out some cute clothes for little Suama,”

Shiori said, beaming.

“It was just a joke, bro! I’m going too!” Saori said hurriedly.

Mwa ha ha. I knew those two would jump at the chance to go check out what the latest fashion trends were in this world. Plus, I’d figured there was no way Shiori—aka Miss “Cute is Justice”—would pass up an opportunity to go shopping with Aina either. And since Saori always hated feeling left out, I was sure she’d instantly volunteer to join them too. In fact, the second Aina had said yes to my request, I already knew I’d won this battle.

“Thanks, girls,” I said, trying to sound as neutral as I could even though I was inwardly gloating about my genius. I took a few coins out of my wallet and handed them to the twins and Aina. “Here. That should be more than enough for a few new outfits. If you have any money left after you’ve bought them, you’re free to do whatever you like with it.”

“Kay,” Aina said with a nod. “See you later, Mister Shiro!”

“See you later. Take care out there.”

“The outfits we’re gonna get for Suama will be soooo cute, you won’t believe your eyes, bro!” Saori boasted.

“You’ll see just how impeccable my fashion sense is, bro-bro,” Shiori announced confidently.

“I’m sure you girls will do just great,” I said as I waved them off.

Then, once I was sure they were out of the shop, I turned back to Raiya.

“Okay, now that we’re alone, think you could tell me what all this ‘crazy stuff’ you were talking about is?”

Chapter Twelve: What's Causing the Guild Trouble?

Raiya smirked at me and started explaining the situation. “So recently, there’s been—”

Or at least he *tried* to explain it.

“Hey, hold on a minute, Raiya! That’s confidential guild information!” Emille piped up, immediately cutting him off.

“Surely we can tell Shiro, can’t we? He might not be an adventurer as such, but he is kind of *part* of the guild in a way,” Raiya argued.

Emille let out a long, pensive “Hmmm...” before giving in. “Fine, I’ll allow it. But only because you’re my future husband, mister!”

“Good,” Raiya said with a nod. “Now that I have Emille’s approval, I can continue. Listen, man, you absolutely cannot tell—”

I stopped him as panic gripped me. “Wait, wait, hold on a sec, Raiya! If I learn about whatever this is, does that mean I *actually* have to marry Emille?” I asked, horrified.

Emille puffed out her cheeks like a petulant child. “Well, even if Raiya doesn’t tell you about it, *I* will, so you’ll *have* to marry me either way!”

“So there’s basically no way for me to survive this, then? I’m doomed!” I lamented.

“It’s okay, Shiro,” Nesca said. “We’ll protect you from Emi.”

“Yup, yup, meow!” Kilpha piped up. “You don’t have to worry about her!”

“I shall not let her lay a single finger on you, Mr. Shiro, sir. You are, after all, our savior,” Rolf added, smiling warmly at me.

“Thank you so much, you guys!” I said, reinvigorated by the reassuring words of my comrades.

Emille, on the other hand, simply clicked her tongue and looked visibly

annoyed that my friends had thwarted her plans. It looked as though all hope wasn't lost for me, after all, and I'd managed to somehow navigate my way onto the path to survival. For the time being, at least.

"Can I continue now, man?" Raiya asked.

"Yeah," I said with a nod, straightening up to show I was ready to listen intently to what he had to say.

"So for the past couple of weeks, there have been loads of..." He paused. "Well, let's call them 'shady characters' loitering around the forest," Raiya explained.

"Shady, you say? How so?" I inquired.

"Look, don't tell anyone this, okay, man? What we're about to say to you is super confidential information."

"I promise I won't tell a soul," I said firmly.

Raiya glanced around, then lowered his voice. "Demons. There are demons wandering around the forest."

According to Rolf, these "demons" lived on an island just off the northern edge of the continent. The magic they wielded was much more powerful than that of most of the other races, plus they were blessed with incredible constitutions, and unfortunately for us, they were also very, very aggressive. Apparently, they'd been attacking countries all across the continent for the past five hundred years or so, and these skirmishes had led to countless casualties on both sides.

"Five hundred years?" I repeated, dumbfounded by this.

"Indeed," Rolf said with a grim nod. "There are several long-lived tribes among the demons' ranks—though none of them possess life spans quite as long as elves—so even though five hundred years might seem an awfully long time to us humes, it likely does not feel nearly as long to them."

"Hm? Several long-lived 'tribes'? So even among demons, there are different tribes?" I asked.

"Indeed. We refer to all the tribes that live on that island as 'demons.' There

are sixteen demon tribes that we know of at present, but there may well be more,” Rolf explained.

“I see. But why did they start attacking hume nations in the first place?” I inquired.

I was trying my best to ask questions in a neutral tone of voice, but the truth was, the second I’d heard the word “demons,” my heart had started racing. Look, I couldn’t help it, okay? That particular word just stirred my inner middle schooler.

“I read in one of the books at the temple that the demon king raised an army to conquer the world,” Rolf said. “However, another book stated the demons were simply fighting back against a hume king who, after losing control of his own country, tried to take charge of the island.”

“So what you’re saying is...” I trailed off.

Rolf nodded. “Precisely. No one knows exactly how the conflict started,” he concluded with a soft chuckle.

Rolf went on to tell me that there hadn’t been a single attack on any of the hume nations by demons in the last century or so. Naturally, I asked why that was the case, and Nesca was the one who answered my question.

“A hundred years ago, the demon king and the hume ruler of the northern part of the continent signed a ceasefire agreement,” she explained.

“What? No, that wasn’t it,” Raiya said. “The demons started infighting. That’s why the attacks stopped. One of the demon king’s four generals betrayed him, and well, the demons all kinda lost their marbles after that.”

Kilpha shook her head and brought her lips closer to my ear. “Don’t listen to either of them. The truth is, the demon king was slain by a hero. That’s why all the demons stopped attacking us, meow.”

Well, it appeared no one knew the answer to *that* question either. I let out a pensive “Hm.”

“So going off what you guys have just told me, the guild’s afraid that these demons wandering around the forest might be preparing to attack Ninoritch. Is

that right?" I said.

My comrades all nodded in unison. They told me the Adventurers' Guild had spent the past few weeks patrolling around the forest so that none of Ninoritch's citizens would accidentally run into any of these roving demons. It also explained why Ney had gone out of her way to assist that group of adventurers in transporting the treasure they'd found in the ruins back to Ninoritch: it gave her a handy excuse to spend several weeks out in the forest while she tried to track down these demons. And not only that, but some of the highest-ranked adventurers in town were already discreetly preparing to repel these demons if they did launch an attack on Ninoritch. I suddenly had a light-bulb moment. *Speaking of which, when I brought the twins to Ninoritch for the first time, didn't I bump into Kilpha while she was out on patrol around the town? Was that also because of the demons?* I remembered wondering if it was really necessary for her to patrol, given how peaceful a place Ninoritch was. At the time, having adventurers keep watch had seemed a little excessive, but now that I knew of this development, it all made sense.

"So are these demons strong?" was my next question.

"Yup. I've heard they're *suuuper* strong and *suuuper* dangerous, meow!" Kilpha replied.

"Really?" I said. "They're seriously *that* strong?"

"Man, is it just me, or do you seem kinda *excited* after learning all that?" Raiya said, eyeing me suspiciously.

"Uh, how can you tell?" I said.

"It's written all over your face, dude."

"It is?"

Could you really blame me, though? They'd been talking about demon kings and generals and heroes and whatnot for a while now, and like, c'mon... Would I really have stepped through the portal to this world if I *wasn't* into all that stuff?

"Meow-ha-ha!" Kilpha bellowed, laughing heartily. "We can see right through you, Shiro, meow!"

“This proves yet again that Mr. Shiro truly is an honest man,” Rolf said with a smile.

Nesca sighed. “I wish Raiya would learn a thing or two from you.”

“What the heck, Nesca? I don’t lie! Sure, I like pulling *pranks* and stuff, but I sure as hell ain’t no *liar*!” Raiya objected, but his protests were met with complete silence. “A-Anyway, who cares about that?! Hey, you know what, man? If this whole deal excites you *that* much, then how about we let you have the first go at questioning any demons we catch? What d’ya think of that?” he teased, changing the topic entirely.

“Oh, really?” I said, raising an eyebrow. “Well, if that did happen, I’d probably tell them all about this really strong adventurer called Raiya, and warn them how much of a threat he is to demonkind. Then I’d release them.” I smirked.

Raiya gulped loudly. “Damn, you’ve got one hell of a smart mouth on ya, man.”

“Learned from the best.”

Raiya made a face that said “Touché” while the rest of the gang snickered away in the background.

“Well, anyway, I wonder what the demons are doing in the forest,” I said, returning to the original topic.

“Who knows?” Raiya said with a shrug. “What could possibly bring a bunch of demons so close to a hume settlement—” He stopped midsentence as his gaze fell on the sleeping figure on the sofa.

A few days back, I’d stumbled across a super rare dragon egg in the forest. A few weeks back, a number of demons had appeared in the forest. The pieces were all finally falling into place.

“Raiya...” I said slowly. “I think I might have an idea what brought the demons here.”

“You too? That’s a coincidence. I think I also just figured it out.”

We exchanged a look and nodded at each other. Were the demons after Suama?



“So we’re all agreed that I should keep Suama a secret until Ney gets back, yes?” I asked, summing up the discussion I’d just had with my comrades. Everyone nodded in agreement.

The Blue Flash crew had all been vehement in their collective opinion that we should keep Suama hidden from the demons. It appeared she was the offspring of a legendary dragon, which meant she probably possessed incredible power. Of course, we hadn’t actually had any of this *confirmed* yet, but it was the most likely scenario. And if she ended up under the control of the demons, who knew how long it would be before they launched an attack on the humes again, with her leading the charge? According to Nesca, having a dragon as powerful as we suspected Suama was in their ranks would easily ensure victory for any army, which meant one thing was certain: we absolutely could not let her fall into the demons’ hands.

So after my own change of heart, as well as the twins’ strong opposition to the idea of me selling Suama, plus Emille’s total one-eighty on the matter, and now this whole damn demon business on top, it became very clear to everyone that I’d be keeping Suama around for a little while longer.

Chapter Thirteen: The Ever-Growing Business

A few days later, a good friend of mine turned up on my doorstep all the way from the region's feudal capital, Mazela.

"Hey, Shiro. It's been a while," my fellow merchant, Zidan, said as he entered my store.

Zidan was a birdman, which meant he basically looked like an owl in the shape of a human. But don't be fooled by his appearance! While he may have looked all soft and fluffy, he was actually the leader of the Eternal Promise, a merchant guild based in Mazela.

"Long time no see, Zidan. I got you all those items you ordered," I said.

"You did? And here I was, worrying that I might have asked you for too much! I was already thinking it would be great if you'd managed to get together even half of what I wanted in the short space of time since I put in the order. I really should learn to stop underestimating you, Shiro," he said, hooting with laughter.

"Don't worry. I had more than enough time to get it all ready for you while you were making your way here," I assured him. "Anyway, did you want to come and check out the goods?"

Zidan nodded. "Lead the way."

"Okay, let's go."

I led Zidan out to the shop's backyard, and the second I opened the door, his jaw dropped.

"Hoot, hoot! I-Is this *all* soap?!" he asked, gawking at the mountain of crates in front of us.

"Forty crates of soap, twenty crates of shampoo, twenty crates of hair treatment, and twenty crates of conditioner. I reckon this should fill about five, maybe six carts," I told Zidan.

The hair care sets I'd sold in Mazela had been a roaring success, which was unsurprising really, as they smelled incredible and made the hair of anyone who used them incredibly smooth and glossy. And not only that, but a rumor had started spreading across the land: *Someone in Mazela is selling magic soap that makes your hair all silky and smooth after just one use!*

And well, due to that rumor, merchants from all over the kingdom had rushed to Mazela in droves and pounded on the door of the Eternal Promise guild to beg Zidan to sell them some of this "magic soap," so they could resell it themselves elsewhere. In retrospect, it really was a good thing I'd granted Zidan the exclusive distribution rights for the shampoo and the other hair care products. If I hadn't done that, I could practically guarantee that hordes of greedy merchants would have already swarmed to Ninoritch, attempting to get me to give *them* the distribution rights to the shampoo.

"Still, you've got a lot of products here," I said. "Be careful you don't get attacked by thieves on your way back to Mazela."

Transporting in-demand products was always a pretty risky endeavor in this world. In fact, Zidan's own father had lost his life after his cart was attacked on the road by brigands. Zidan must have noticed the anxious look on my face, because he shot me a reassuring smile and slapped his chest with his fist.

"That won't be an issue," he said. "Lord Bashure provided me with an escort, meaning I traveled here with a couple of knights. So don't you worry. Everything's under control."

"He did?" I asked, my eyes growing wide. "And *knights*, you say? That's a pretty legit escort."

"Isn't it just? The earl really, *really* wants that soap to reach Mazela without incident. Though maybe not as much as his wife does, of course! Hoot hoot hoot!" Zidan said, laughing at his own joke.

Well, that made sense. After all, the more merchants that came to Mazela to get a glimpse of this "magic soap," the better it would be for the city's economy. The earl of the region, Lord Bashure, seemed to consider the shampoo sets valuable enough to warrant sending a few knights all the way to Ninoritch with Zidan just to make sure it all reached the city safely. And I

wagered that the fact his wife was so totally crazy about the shampoo sets had somewhat reassured him that it was the right decision to allocate resources to the task.

“I see. That’s good,” I said. “Well, if you’ve got knights traveling with you, there’s nothing to worry about.”

“Exactly!”

“All righty. Did you want to take a look at the goods to make sure everything’s in order?” I asked, pointing at the mountain of crates behind me.

“Uh, well...” The birdman hesitated. “Th-There are so many crates, that’s quite a daunting task.” He paused as he scanned the pile, before appearing to reach a decision. “You know what? I trust you, Shiro. I don’t need to check anything.”

“C’mon, Zidan, you’re a guildmaster! You can’t go around saying things like that!” I chided him. “Just take a quick look, yeah? I’ll help you out,” I offered, as I forcefully pushed him toward the huge mountain of crates.



“Phew!” Zidan sighed. “Finally done.”

The sun had already started setting by this time. All in all, there were one hundred 50x50 cm boxes full of soap and shampoo in my backyard, and needless to say, it had been an exhausting job checking through them all. The moment we were done, Zidan and I plonked ourselves down on the ground and leaned against each other’s backs for support.

“Whew,” I said, letting out a sigh of my own. “Good work, Zidan.”

“Right back at you.”

“How about bringing a couple of underlings with you next time?” I joked. “I heard the Eternal Promise is doing great. You even moved to a new guildhall, didn’t you?”

“Hoot hoot!” Zidan laughed. “That’s right. We have a huge guild now, and it’s all thanks to you. I’ve hired a bunch more people over the last couple of weeks.”

“Perfect. Let them do all the boring work while you sit back and watch next time,” I said. “You could even send them here in your stead. It must be annoying traveling between Mazela and Ninoritch every time you need to restock.”

“No, that won’t do. When it comes to my business with you, I promised myself I wouldn’t delegate any part of it to anyone else,” Zidan told me, his expression deadly serious.

I was so taken aback by his words, I didn’t know what to say.

“So let’s keep up the good work, okay, Shiro?” he said, then he turned to me and held out his hand.

I shook it and smiled. “You got it, Zidan,” I said, then I stood up with a quiet little “Heave-ho!” before looking around and pulling my partner to his feet too. “C’mon, up you go.”

Once the birdman was upright again, he brushed the dirt off his pants.

“Oh, by the way, there was something I’ve been meaning to ask you,” he said.

“Oh? What’s that?”

“It’s probably just a rumor, but I heard someone here in Ninoritch has found a remedy for the Decaying Disease. Is that true?” he asked me.

“The Decaying Disease?” I said, somewhat puzzled, before realization struck. “Oh! You’re talking about beriberi.”

It had been a hot minute since I’d last heard the term and it had taken me a moment to remember what it even was. The Decaying Disease was the affliction Aina’s mother, Stella, had been suffering from when I first came to this world. Back on Earth, it was known as beriberi and it was a condition that occurred in people who weren’t getting enough of a certain vitamin. And since it was basically nothing more than a vitamin deficiency, it was relatively simple to cure just by taking supplements.

“It’s true,” I said, nodding. “A few months ago, someone in town was suffering from the Decaying Disease, but I managed to heal her, thanks to medicine from my homeland.”

“Are you *serious*?!” Zidan shrieked, his jaw dropping to the floor. The fatigue that had been weighing down his limbs only moments before seemed to have disappeared completely. “Shiro! Could you please sell me some of that medicine? I know medicine is expensive and hard to come by and all that, but there are lots of people...”

“Sure, I don’t mind,” I said, not even letting him finish his sentence.

“...in Mazela who really need it. So please, can you—Huh? Wait, what did you just say?”

“I said: ‘Sure, I don’t mind,’” I repeated.

“You mean it? You’re really, really gonna sell it to me?!” he blurted out, gawking at me.

“Of course. Ninoritch’s economy has been doing great recently, and no one here needs that medicine, so it’s just been sitting around in my storeroom, gathering dust. I can give it to you for free, if you like.”

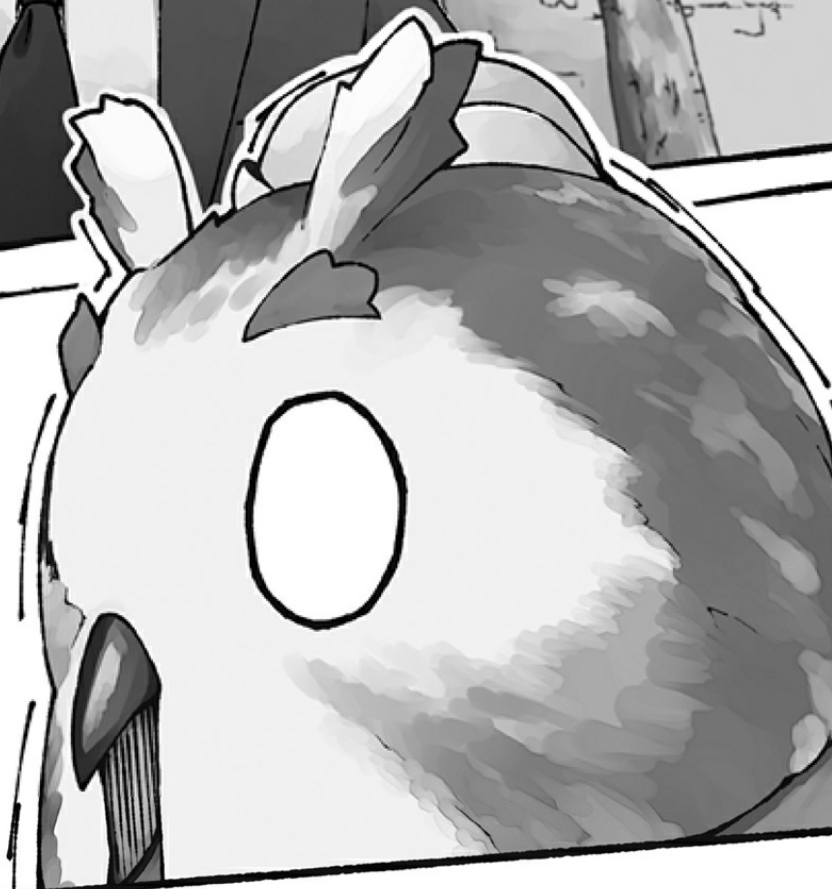
“Whaaaaat?!” Zidan shrieked again, even louder this time.

He proceeded to tell me that there were still countless people suffering from the Decaying Disease in Mazela. Zidan had personally come across many cases of the disease, due to the previous guildhall being located in the slums and his insistence on always trying to help the people there find work, and he felt heartbroken for those afflicted with it.

I gave Zidan the dozen or so supplement bottles I had lying around and went through the dosage with him, as well as telling him how to administer it correctly. He listened intently to my instructions with a serious look on his face, and when I was done, he thanked me over and over.



!?





“Here. This should cover what I’ve bought today,” Zidan said as he plonked a bulging leather pouch full of coins down on the table with a dull thud. “Now it’s your turn to count. Oh, and I put in a little extra, seeing as how you gave me that medicine for free.”

Once we’d finished going through the mountain of crates of soap I’d prepared for Zidan, we’d moved to the drawing room, which was up on the second floor.

I let out an exaggerated groan. “You know what? I trust you, Zidan. I don’t need to check anything,” I declared, repeating what he’d said before, word for word.

“No, no, that won’t do. You have to make sure I’ve paid you in full. That’s what a *proper* merchant would do,” he teased, smirking.

Judging by his expression, this was his way of getting back at me for doing the same to him earlier. I pretended to sob self-pityingly as I opened the pouch and started counting the coins inside.

“Looks like you’re still making bank, Shiro. What do you plan on doing with all this money that’s rolling in?” Zidan asked me all of a sudden.

“I don’t really know yet. For now, I’m just saving it up, but...” I started, then I stopped myself midsentence as I remembered that I was presently living with a baby dragon. “Actually, at this moment in time, I plan to put it all toward covering my food bill,” I said, a strained laugh escaping my lips.

“Your food bill?” Zidan queried, surprised by this.

“Yeah. You see, I have a growing child I’m taking care of at the moment.”

The moment these words left my mouth, I heard the telltale click of the door opening, and Suama entered the room. *Looks like my spoiled little princess has woken up from her nap.*

Making an excited cooing noise, she flung herself at me and wrapped her little arms around my neck. She was wearing one of the outfits Shiori had bought her a couple of days before. According to my little sister, fashion in Ninoritch was just “not it,” and she’d taken it upon herself to order a handful of outfits for

Suama online.

“Is that your daughter?” Zidan asked.

“Not exactly, but due to various circumstances, I’m looking after her for the moment,” I said evasively.

“I see,” Zidan said, nodding. “Seems you’ve got a lot going on, huh?”

I wasn’t even married, yet I already had a child (or well, a dragon hatchling) to look after. And while she may have been a toddler, she was still a dragon, an incredibly dangerous creature. Well, supposedly. Up to this point, Suama had thankfully never exhibited any sort of violent behavior toward me or anyone else, seeming fairly content to spend her days largely glued to my side. Looking up at me as she dangled from my neck, she let out a happy cry, a huge smile plastered across her face. *I would do everything in my power to protect that smile*, I thought to myself.

Jeez, listen to me. Not even married yet—hell, I didn’t even have a girlfriend—and I was already turning into a doting father. That wouldn’t do. Though it wasn’t my biggest issue at present.

“Your daughter certainly has a big appetite,” Zidan noted with amazement, watching on as Suama proceeded to stuff her face with the mountain of food I’d just taken out of my inventory and put on the table for her.

“Tell me about it,” I groaned. “My household’s Engel coefficient has shot up like you wouldn’t believe in the past week.”

“Your Engel what?” Zidan asked, sounding confused.

“My food bill,” I clarified.

Yup, that’s right: my current issue was Suama’s appetite, because she ate *a lot*. Every day without fail, she would have two breakfasts, three lunches, an afternoon snack, two dinners, and a midnight feast. I had no idea how she could even fit all that food into such a tiny body. From what I’d been told, humans at her age usually ate, slept, ate, then slept some more. But Suama was a dragon, and she tended to eat, eat, eat some more, eat a little bit more than that, then eat even more, then play until she was all tuckered out, then sleep. That meant I had to buy enough food to keep her satiated, which in turn had sent my food

budget skyrocketing. In fact, I probably wouldn't get to save up any of the money I'd just made from my transaction with Zidan, since it would probably all end up going toward feeding Suama.

"I don't have a kid myself, but I've heard that growing children do need lots of food," Zidan remarked.

"No kidding. But don't worry, I'm making sure she can eat to her heart's content," I said, letting out a strained laugh.



Suama was finally done eating, and with her stomach now full, she was having trouble keeping her eyes open.

"Oh, by the way," Zidan said out of the blue. "On my way over, I walked past a shop that had an insanely long line outside."

"Oh, really?" I said. "Where was that? Near the main square?"

"Yup. The shop had a red roof, if I remember correctly. I wonder what kind of items they sell there," Zidan mused aloud.

The second I heard the words "red roof," I knew exactly what shop he was talking about. After all, how could I not? I was the one who was currently renting it.

"I know what shop that is, yeah," I said. "My little sisters are the ones who run that place. Well, I say that, but today's their grand opening."

"Your little sisters?" Zidan queried, surprised by this.

I nodded. "Yup."

See, I wasn't the only one worried about the giant hole Suama's insatiable appetite was burning in my wallet. By way of explanation, I started recounting the events of the past few days to Zidan. The twins and I had been watching Suama voraciously gobbling down her meal when Shiori suddenly turned to me with a serious look on her face.

"Bro-bro, Saorin and I wanna make some money to help you pay for all this food Suama's eating," she stated.

“What? Why would you do that, Shiori-chan?” I asked.

“Shiorin and I talked about it the other day,” Saori piped up. “I was the one who decided we should keep Suama, so I’ve been thinking I should take responsibility for my actions.” She shot me a look of pure determination.

“S-Saori?” I said tentatively.

“So bro-bro...” Shiori started, then trailed off.

“Bro...” Saori said.

“Can you lend us some money so we can open up our own shop?” they asked in unison, perfectly synchronized.

“Wait, hold on a minute! Didn’t you just say you wanted to make money yourselves?” I reminded them.

“Yup, we did!” Shiori said, beaming at me.

“But we need funds if we’re going to open up a store!” Saori added.

“Huh?”

“C’mon, bro. Are you stupid or what? Shiorin and I want to open up our own shop, just like you did!”

“Say *what*?!”

The twins wanted to start their own business in Ninoritch. Using *my* money, might I add. I was really unsure about the idea at first, but after giving it some thought, I decided: *Well, why not?* So I gave them some money and told them they could do whatever they liked with it, which in my humble opinion, was very “big brotherly” of me. After all, the two of them were sixteen and had never worked a day in their lives, so I figured this world was as good as anywhere for them to get their first taste of work experience. As such, the two of them spent the next couple of days mulling over what kind of goods they would sell in their shop, while I got everything else sorted down at the town hall, renting a store for them to do business in. They had officially opened their shop that very morning.

“So both you *and* your sisters have your own shops now? That’s so awesome. You’re basically a family of peddlers now!” Zidan commented once I’d finished,

visibly impressed by the actions of my little sisters.

Speaking of which, I had no idea what kind of wares the twins had actually decided to sell in their shop. I made a mental note to go check on them later in the day.



“Well, it was really nice seeing you again, Shiro! Bye!” Zidan called out as he climbed into the wagon that would take him back to Mazela.

“Bye, Zidan. Have a safe trip,” I called back, waving him off.

It was about three in the afternoon by this point. I went back inside and looked around.

“Hey, Aina, do you mind if I head out for a bit?” I said to the little girl. The shop wasn’t all that busy, and I knew she’d be fine on her own for a little while.

Aina giggled. “You’re worried about Miss Shiori and Miss Saori, aren’t you, Mister Shiro?”

Until she pointed it out, I hadn’t even noticed that I’d been extremely fidgety all day. “Yup, you’re spot on, Aina. I’m wondering if the two of them are taking their work seriously, and I’m also really curious how their shop’s doing. I’d like to go check on them, if you don’t mind holding down the fort,” I said.

“Sure,” the little girl chirruped. “I can take care of the shop and little Su!”

“Thanks, Aina. I’ll be off, then!”

And with that, I made my way over to my little sisters’ new store.



When I’d first started doing business in Ninoritch, I didn’t have my own store, just a designated spot at the marketplace, as that was much cheaper than renting out an entire building. But my little sisters didn’t have to go through that step, immediately starting off with their own brick-and-mortar store, and these past few days, they’d kept boasting about how it was all going to be “easy-peasy.” Maybe their thinking was if my store was doing well, there was no reason theirs wouldn’t.

“I got pretty lucky with my shop. I wonder how those two are managing,” I muttered to no one in particular.

I tried telling myself that even if their shop wasn't doing great, what mattered most was the work experience they were gaining from running their own store, though I couldn't help secretly hoping their first business venture would be a success. So it was with mixed feelings of hope and worry that I made my way toward the twins' shop. Unlike my store, it wasn't in or around the marketplace, but rather, close to the town square. It wasn't an ideal location as this unfortunately meant there wouldn't be as many potential customers milling around the area, since most people looking to buy stuff tended to head straight for the marketplace, and because of that, the twins would likely have an even harder time selling their wares. Or so I'd thought.

“Holy crap,” I whispered in amazement when I saw the huge line that had formed outside their shop. It was as long, if not longer, than the line I'd had in front of my shop on my very first day.

“What kind of stuff are those two even selling for so many people to want to check out their shop?” I muttered to myself as I looked up at the sign above the door that read “Beauty Amata” in neon pink writing, with a tagline of “For an even more beautiful you” below it.

I couldn't help a shudder of delight shooting up my spine. That was how extremely impressed I was by the store's catchy name and bold slogan.

Chapter Fourteen: Beauty Amata

“Beauty Amata”? What kind of shop could that be? I wondered. I glanced at the customers waiting in line and noticed they were all women, and most of them seemed pretty young. I switched my attention to the women leaving the shop, and saw that every single one of them had makeup on, with some wearing clothes that had obviously been bought in Japan.

“Oh, I see. So that’s how it is,” I muttered to myself, nodding sagely.

I asked the women at the front of the line if I could go in before them and check out the shop, and none of them had an issue with it. Well, it *was* my last name up there on the sign, so they’d probably put two and two together and figured out this place was being run by relatives of mine. I stepped inside the store and gasped in amazement. The first thing I noticed were the dozen or so clothes racks bulging with clothes, some of which seemed to have been bought online, while others had clearly been thrifted.

When I’d sent my sisters off to buy clothes for Suama, Shiori had come back complaining that she hadn’t been able to find anything cute. That must have been what had given them the bright idea of opening up this shop to sell clothes from Japan in Ruffaltio. And it was working! This style of clothing must have felt really novel and fresh to the young women of Ninoritch, not to mention how much softer the fabric would have been compared to the stuff they were used to. The twins had installed floor-length mirrors all around the store so that their customers could hold the clothes up in front of themselves and see if they suited them.

“Oh, hi, bro-bro,” Shiori greeted me from behind a counter. She was sitting on a chair, applying makeup to a young woman’s face. As I’d suspected from seeing the women leaving the shop, not only were the twins selling clothes, they were also offering in-store beauty services. It was sheer genius: customers could simply walk in and get a full makeover without needing to visit any other establishment.

“Heya, Shiori-chan,” I replied. “It’s only your first day but I see your store’s doing great.”

She giggled. “Saorin and I are just amazing, aren’t we?”

I nodded. “You really are. I never would’ve thought of opening up a store like this.”

“It’s a pretty obvious thing to do, though. I mean, girls are always wanting to find ways to make themselves more beautiful, no matter where they’re from!” Shiori said before shifting her attention back to the woman in front of her.

I admittedly didn’t know a whole lot about makeup, but I could tell that Shiori was pretty good at applying it. The makeup she’d put on this particular young woman was subtle but it really brought out her natural beauty without overpowering it. Shiori had always loved drawing and making stuff with her hands, and there was no denying that she was the most dexterous of the three of us. She was so passionate, in fact, she’d even joined her school’s art club, and it looked like she was having a blast doing makeup for all of these women, as shown by the contented smile plastered across her face as she applied the finishing touches to her current customer’s look.

“There you go! All done!” she announced in a singsong voice.

The young woman looked at herself in the mirror and her jaw dropped to the floor. “This...” she whispered, sounding both shocked and amazed. “This is really *me*?”

If even I, a perfect stranger, had been impressed by how good the makeup looked on her, it came as no surprise that she’d be even more affected by it.

“This is your new makeup set, and this here is makeup remover,” Shiori said, showing the woman the items before putting them into a bag which she handed to her. “There are instructions on how to use each product in there too, so don’t hesitate to try it out at home.”

“Thank you so much. Here you go,” the lady said as she placed a few copper coins on the counter before turning and leaving the shop, grinning from ear to ear. The second she stepped outside, a chorus of “oohs” and “aahs” could be heard from the waiting crowd. They all seemed pretty impressed with Shiori’s

makeup skills.

“This is gonna be one *hell* of a popular shop,” I muttered to myself.

Out of the blue, I heard Saori’s voice from the other side of the counter.

“All done!” she chirped.

I turned around and saw that she had just finished doing another woman’s makeup.

“You look stunning, miss!” she said proudly as she handed the woman a little mirror.

But the young woman simply stared at the mirror in stunned silence. Shiori and I caught a glimpse of the woman’s makeup and reacted similarly, the two of us gawking at her, while Saori continued to happily babble away.

“You’re really lucky you got me to do your makeup for you, miss! I’ve done a fantastic job, if I do say so myself,” she boasted.

The woman sitting opposite Saori looked like a wrestling villain. Her face was caked in a thick layer of powdery-white foundation, making it look almost like she was wearing a mask. The blush on her cheeks looked incredibly out of place, and I couldn’t help wondering quite *how* Saori could possibly have thought that particular shade of blush was a good idea. But the worst part was the eyeliner. From how I understood it, eyeliner was generally used to make a person’s eyes look bigger, which was fine. I had zero qualms with that. However, I’d never seen *anyone* apply eyeliner the way Saori had on this woman. She’d started off by drawing circles around the young lady’s eyes with black eyeliner, then proceeded to add white eyeliner *all around it*. It looked incredibly freaky, and only served to reinforce the whole “evil boss who wants to take over the world” vibe that defined this look. I couldn’t even discern the woman’s facial features under all that makeup. Seriously, she could’ve walked into an arena with huge explosions going off behind her and everyone would have naturally assumed she was there to play the role of the villain in a wrestling match.



“Saorin’s not very good at makeup,” Shiori quietly explained when she saw the look of sheer horror on my face.

“Bit of an understatement, don’t you think, Shiori-chan? Everyone has their strengths and weaknesses, and makeup definitely is *not* one of Saori’s strengths,” I whispered back.

“I know! I tried to talk her out of it, but she insisted she could do it and refused to listen to me,” Shiori pouted.

While Shiori and I were discussing this utter debacle in hushed voices, the woman-turned-wrestling villain suddenly got up from her seat and left the shop without saying a word. Shrieks of horror rose from the crowd in vivid contrast to the coos of awe and delight the previous woman’s exit had attracted. *Hopefully, this incident won’t deter any of the other customers from checking out the store,* I thought to myself.

“Do you think that lady’s mad?” Shiori asked me quietly.

“Judging by her reaction, I think it’s a fair bet,” I said.

“Yeah, I thought so too,” Shiori sighed. She didn’t outright say it, but I could tell she felt really bad that things had gone so wrong on their first day of business.

“It’s not your fault,” I reassured her. “You know what? I’ll go apologize to her. You focus on stopping Saori from ruining your business. Under no circumstances is she allowed anywhere near a makeup brush until she has learned how to use one properly. Understood?”

Shiori nodded. “I’ll try.”

“Good luck. And remember: if you’re going to charge people for a service, you need to be able to deliver. Got that?”

“Wow, you sounded like a grown-up just then,” Shiori marveled.

“I *am* a grown-up. And I have a lot more experience at being a merchant than you too,” I boasted, sounding a little patronizing in the process and not altogether unintentionally. “Anyway, I’m gonna go after that lady. You give Saori a piece of your mind, all right?”

“All right,” she said with a nod.

“I’ll be back soon,” I said, then darted out of the shop.



It didn’t take me long to find the woman in question.

“Excuse me!” I called out to her, causing her to stop in her tracks and turn to face me. “I just wanted to apologize for what my sister—Oh! You’re the lady from before!” I exclaimed.

Yup, that’s right. I’d seen this woman before. It had taken me a while to recognize her under all of the wrestling villain makeup Saori had applied to her face, but I definitely remembered her.

“Oh, it’s you,” she said, seemingly recognizing me too.

The makeup really did make her look like a pro wrestler—the kind who would be introduced into the ring as the “Envoy from Hell” or something along those lines—but I would’ve recognized this tall, slim figure with snow-white skin and crimson eyes anywhere. She was the woman who had asked me for directions only a few days earlier.

“Oh, you remember me?” I said with a smile. “Did you find what you were looking for?”

She shook her head. “It wasn’t at that ‘town hall,’ or whatever it was you called it.” Due to the villain makeup, it almost looked like she was blaming me for this, and I felt a shiver shoot up my spine.

“I see. That’s a shame,” I sympathized. “I hope you manage to get your hands on it soon.”

“I do too. When I saw the line of humes standing and waiting in front of that building, I thought it would be in there for sure, but I was wrong. It seems that place is where you humes go to get your war paint done.”

“Our ‘war paint’ done?” I said, confused.

“Isn’t that what this is?” she asked, pointing to her face. “This is paint that humes daub across their faces before they go off to fight, yes?”

“Uh, no, it isn’t...” I said slowly. Though I guess she wasn’t *technically* wrong. I mean, if we’d been standing in the middle of a wrestling ring right at that moment, she wouldn’t have been too far off the mark.

“Is it some sort of ritual face paint, then?” she asked.

“No. It’s called makeup,” I explained. “Women use it to enhance their features and make themselves look prettier. Well, usually, anyway. The person who did your makeup didn’t do such a great job of it, so I get why you’re confused.” I let out an awkward laugh.

“Make themselves look prettier? For what purpose?” She looked utterly puzzled about the whole concept.

“Don’t you like it when people call you ‘beautiful’ or ‘pretty’ or ‘cute’?” I said. “Personally, it always lifts my spirits when people tell me I’m handsome, even if they don’t really mean it.”

“No, I’m afraid I don’t follow,” she said, shaking her head. “Where I come from, the only thing that matters is strength. The strong are held in high regard, and the weak...” She stopped herself midsentence before closing her eyes and shaking her head again. “Never mind. Such trivialities would only bore you.”

“No, I’m sorry. I’m the one who started talking about trivial things,” I said quickly.

An awkward silence ensued, but just as I was about to open my mouth to swiftly move on to talking about something else, the woman spoke again.

“Well, now that I know that what I’m searching for categorically *isn’t* in that building, I will go look for it elsewhere. Goodbye.”

And without another word, she turned around and started walking away from me. I stood deep in thought for a few seconds, then called out to her again.

“Please wait!”

She stopped and turned to look at me. “What is it?”

“I could help you look for whatever it is you’ve lost, if you like,” I offered.

“And why would you do that?” she asked after a slight pause.

“It seems like it’s important to you,” I said simply.

I waited for her to answer, but all she did was stare at me, so I tried again.

“Its absence appears to be troubling you, so I’d like to help you find it. Isn’t that a good enough reason?” I said.

“Oh, I think I understand now,” she said. “You make a living looking for lost items and you are offering your services. Is that it?”

I shook my head. “Nope. I’m a merchant, actually. Though I do know a lot of the people around here, and I think I might be able to help you out. Of course, I do have a job to do as well, so any searching would have to be done in my spare time, but—”

I didn’t manage to get to the end of my sentence before the woman interrupted me.

“In your *spare time*? Are you trying to make a fool of me?” she asked, her eyes narrowing angrily.

“Of course not!” I said hurriedly, waving my hands around in front of me to emphasize that this definitely wasn’t my intention. “I would never do such a thing. All I was thinking was that the more people you have looking for this thing you’ve lost, the quicker you’ll find it.”

“I don’t need you to help me in your ‘spare time,’” she said snippily. “However, I might consider hiring you if you promised me you would put the utmost effort into completing the task. Though only if you were to ask for proper compensation, of course.”

Well, she had pretty much rejected my offer. I did truly want to help her, but it seemed she wasn’t interested in my assistance unless I treated it as a proper job.

“The thing I’ve lost would be considered quite valuable by the standards of most people, you see,” she added by way of explanation. “I cannot trust that someone offering their services to me for free won’t simply turn around and steal it instead.”

“I see,” I said with a nod. “In that case, I don’t think I can help you.”

"I thought as much," she said.

"However, I *can* introduce you to a few people who will be able to."

There was a slight pause before she spoke again. "What do you mean?"

"I know some people who 'make a living looking for lost items,' as you put it," I explained, and I noticed her eyes widening slightly at this. "In fact, there are plenty of people in this town who rely on jobs like that to earn their crust. If you're interested, I could tell you where to find them."

"Please do," she said. She seemed a little less on edge now than she had been at the start of the conversation and I inwardly sighed with relief.

"Of course. Okay, so you're going to want to walk this way, then turn right when you get to the first intersection, and then..."

In short, I told her how to get to the Fairy's Blessing guild.

"Tell the lady at reception that you have a job for the guild. After that, all you have to do is show them you have enough money to pay the reward, and they'll decide if they want to take on the job or not."

"Understood," she said with a slight nod, then immediately set off in the direction of the guild.

"Oh, one last thing!" I quickly called after her. "If you tell them 'Shiro' sent you, it might slightly improve the odds of them accepting the commission."

"'Shiro'?" she asked with a frown. "Is that some kind of secret code?"

"No, it's my name," I said.

She paused again. "I see. So your name is Shiro, is it?"

"Yes. Shiro Amata."

I brought my hand up to my chest and bowed elegantly, showing off the new skill I'd mastered in time for the earl's banquet several weeks back. The woman remained silent for a few seconds, seemingly debating something in her head.

"Celesdia," she said.

"Excuse me?"

“That’s my name. Celesdia.”

“Celesdia? May I call you Celes?” I asked.

“Do as you please,” she said impassively. “I have to get going now.”

“Of course, of course. Well, then. I know I’m repeating myself, but I hope you find whatever it is you lost, Celes.”

She didn’t say anything to this, and simply resumed walking in the direction of the Fairy’s Blessing guild. I watched her go, hoping her wrestling villain makeup wouldn’t cause too much of a scene when she got there.

Chapter Fifteen: Aina and Suama

One evening a few days later, after closing up the shop for the day, I took Aina and Suama out into the marketplace and the two of them started playing tag.

“Little Su! I’m here!” Aina called out to the little dragon girl.

“Ai!” Suama cooed happily. She appeared to have started treating Aina like a big sister, probably due to the fact that she spent most of her time at the store with us.

“Look! I’m all the way over here now!”

“Ai!”

The pair of them looked like they were having a lot of fun. Aina was running around (a lot slower than normal to make sure the little dragon girl could keep up) and Suama was attempting to catch her. At some point, Suama started picking up speed and was just on the verge of catching Aina when she suddenly lost her balance.

“Suama!” I cried out, but I was too far away to do anything. Thankfully, Aina managed to catch the little dragon girl in her arms before she toppled over.

“Little Su, are you okay? Are you hurt?” Aina asked, full of concern, but Suama simply let out a little squeal of happiness. “Oh, thank goodness,” Aina sighed with relief.

The second she let go of Suama, I noticed the blood on Aina’s knee. She had thrown herself to the ground to make sure Suama didn’t fall, but she’d ended up being the one who’d gotten hurt instead.

“Aina! A-Are you okay?” I asked, panicking slightly. “I’ll go get Rolf and he can heal you with his magic—”

“I’m fine, Mister Shiro,” she interrupted. “I only grazed my knee.”

“But you’re bleeding!” I protested.

“It’s just a scratch. It’ll heal by itself,” she said.

She was trying to reassure me that everything was fine, but I could see from the look on her face that she was actually in pain, even though she was doing her best not to let it show. *I need to at least put a bandage on it*, I thought, and I'd already started rushing toward my shop when I heard Aina squeak a little cry of surprise. I turned around to see Suama crouching down in front of Aina and licking the wound on her knee like a puppy dog.

"S-Stop that, little Su!" Aina chided her, trying to gently push her away. "You'll get germs in your mouth!"

"She's right, Suama," I said. "We need to put water on it, and—Huh? What the..."

The wound on Aina's knee disappeared in front of our very eyes. Aina squeaked a little noise of sheer incomprehension, her jaw dropping to the floor. The wound really was gone. It was just like that time I'd fallen in the forest and Rolf had used his healing magic to make the wound disappear. Aina and I were too stunned to speak. Suama, on the other hand, was cooing away happily, looking very proud of herself.

"Suama..." I said slowly. "Did you do this?" My gaze flicked from the little dragon girl's face to Aina's miraculously healed knee and back again.

"Ai!" the little dragon girl chirped, nodding.

"Holy moly," I murmured.

Well, it seemed Suama's saliva had the ability to cure wounds. Guess her being a dragon wasn't just for show, huh?

"Thank you, little Su," Aina said, hugging the dragon girl from behind. "It was really nice of you to use your powers to heal me."

"Ai!" Suama squealed happily.

The sun had almost set, and it was about time for Aina to head home, but for some reason, she seemed very reluctant to let go of Suama.

"So she can heal a wound just by licking it? That's seriously impressive," I mused aloud, still astonished by what had just happened.

"What's impressive?" asked a voice from behind me.

I jumped out of my skin and yelped a weird cry of surprise. I spun around and was met with the sight of Stella smiling gently at me.

“Good evening, Mr. Shiro,” she said to me.

“Good evening, Stella,” I replied. “Have you come to pick up Aina?”

“I have, yes. I was waiting for her to come home so we could have dinner together, but it felt like she was taking her time, so I came to check on her,” she said, her gaze landing on her daughter, who was still hugging Suama. “Mr. Shiro, this little girl, um...” She hesitated. “Is she your daughter?” she asked, clearly surprised.

“That’s the third time someone’s asked me that. Is there some rumor going around that I have a secret love child?” I said. Seriously, first it was the Blue Flash crew and Emille, then Zidan, and now Stella. It was almost like some unknown force in this world really wanted me to actually be Suama’s father.

Stella chuckled. “Everyone’s just really curious about you, Mr. Shiro.”

“Is that really all there is to it?” I muttered to myself skeptically.

“Well, if she’s not your daughter, who is this little girl?” Stella asked me.

“She’s called Suama, and I’m looking after her for the time being,” I said, answering as evasively as I could. “It looks like she’s taken quite a shine to Aina, and the pair of them have been playing together for a little while. That’s why Aina wasn’t home at the usual time today. Sorry about that,” I said, before turning toward the two girls. “Hey, Suama! Aina has to go—” I called out to the little dragon girl, but Stella quickly stopped me before I could finish my sentence.

“Oh, no, it’s quite all right, Mr. Shiro,” she said. “Aina’s looking so happy right now. If it’s fine with you, could you let the two of them play for a little bit longer?”

“I mean, sure, I don’t mind, but won’t your dinner get cold?” I asked.

“I can just heat it up.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m quite sure,” Stella said, before allowing her gaze to wander to the

two little girls playing happily together. Aina had picked up a branch and started drawing with it on the ground, and Suama had instantly tried to copy her. After a few seconds of silence, Stella spoke again. “I wasn’t able to give Aina a sibling,” she said softly.

I murmured a noise to indicate that I was listening to what she had to say.

“Aina’s never said it to me directly, but I know she’s always wanted a little sister.”

“Has she?”

Stella nodded. “Once, when she was small, she asked me where babies came from. I had no idea how to answer.”

I laughed. “I think every parent has that reaction. Where I’m from, we tell kids it’s a stork that brings babies to their parents. Oh, a stork’s a type of bird from my homeland.”

“A stork? I like that,” Stella said with a smile. “If she asks again, I’ll know what to tell her this time.”

“Yup,” I said, before turning my attention to the two girls again. They were having so much fun together, in the same way two real sisters would. After a while, Aina turned to look over at us.

“Oh, mama!” she exclaimed when she noticed Stella standing next to me. “Oh, um, I’m sorry, mama,” she added sheepishly. She probably thought she was in trouble for not coming home even though it was getting dark.

But Stella just shook her head, a gentle smile on her face. “I’m not angry, Aina,” she reassured her. “Have you been having fun with Suama?”

The little girl nodded. “Tons!”

“So you’re like her big sister now, are you?”

Aina beamed. “Yup! I’m little Su’s big sister!”

“That’s so nice. You have to make sure you always look after your little sister and protect her, okay? That’s a big sister’s job.”

Aina nodded vigorously at this. “I will! I’m little Su’s big sister, so I’ll always

protect her!”

“What a good girl you are,” Stella said, pulling her in for a hug.

It was then time for Stella and Aina to say their goodbyes and head off home, hand in hand.

“Ain-ya...” Suama whined with a sad look on her face as she watched them leave.

“We should go home too, Suama. You must be hungry,” I said.

“Ai!”

Aina had been helping me look after Suama for a little while by this point, but it seemed that this was the day she finally understood what it meant to be a big sister. *I’m little Su’s big sister, so I’ll always protect her!* she had declared.

It wasn’t until a few days later that I would come to realize just how serious Aina had been when she had said those words.



“Bro, I’m all done setting up the futons,” Saori informed me with a pout later that same evening.

“Thanks, Saori.”

The twins and I had established a new nighttime regime: every day before bedtime, the three of us would do rock-paper-scissors to decide which of us would put out the futons. And as you can probably tell, that evening, Saori was the one who had lost, hence why she was pouting.

“Bro-bro, you’re sleeping on this side, then it’s Suama and me in the middle, and Saorin’s on the other side,” Shiori declared.

“What? No fair, Shiorin! I wanna share with Suama!” Saori protested.

“You did. Last week. Now it’s my turn,” Shiori retorted.

“But you’ve shared with her two more times than me!” Saori moaned. “Two more times!”

“It’s not my fault you always lose when we play cards to decide who gets to share with her,” Shiori said with a shrug.

“W-Well, let’s decide it with a card game again today!”

“Sure. Just one game, though.”

“Best of three!”

“Nope.”

“Then five! At the very *least*!”

“I don’t think you quite get how negotiating works, Saorin,” her sister said.

It had been roughly twenty days since Suama had entered my life, and the two of us had been joined at the hip ever since. I used to spend the majority of my days in Ninoritch and head back to grandma’s house at night, but now that I had Suama to take care of, I’d started sleeping over in Ninoritch as well. There was nothing technically stopping me from taking her to Japan with me if I decided I wanted to spend the night over there, but that didn’t seem like a very good idea. After all, while she might look like a normal little girl, she was still a dragon. What if she turned back into her original form, then wandered off around Tokyo? That would be an absolute catastrophe. So I decided staying with her in Ninoritch would be the much safer thing to do. The only time I ever left Ruffaltio these days was when I needed to stock up on my wares.

Saori’s whining pulled me back to reality. “Aw c’mon, Shiorin! I haven’t seen Suama in *five* days!”

“I haven’t seen her either, you know,” Shiori pointed out.

Yup, the twins’ break had ended a while back, which meant they’d been forced to return to our parents’ house. Going back to school and not getting to spend all their time in Ruffaltio anymore had been a real downer for the pair, but they hadn’t *completely* given up on visiting the other world. Every Friday, the second their classes ended, the two of them jumped on the first train to grandma’s house. It took approximately an hour by train from their school to grandma’s, and perhaps it came as no great surprise that I was the one expected to pay all their traveling costs. The two of them were still only high schoolers, yet they got to spend their weekends in another world. Quite frankly, I was super jealous. Why didn’t I get to do that as a teenager, huh?

Anyway, since I was now spending all my nights over in Ninoritch too, I’d

decided to turn one of the other upstairs rooms into a bedroom. I'd cleaned it up and even put tatami mats in there for comfort, and unlike the rest of my shop, this was a "shoes strictly prohibited" kind of room. So just like every Friday night for the past couple of weeks, the twins and I were sitting in this newly converted room in our pajamas, ready for bed.

"Ai!"

Oh, and of course, Suama was there too, wearing the toddler version of the pajama set I was wearing.

"Suama! Repeat after me: Mom-my Sa-o-ri!" Saori cooed at the little girl, who babbled some gibberish back at her.

"Suama, try saying 'Mommy Shiori,'" my other sister tried.

The two of them seemed to really want Suama to call them "mommy" for some reason.

"Mo-wee?" Suama babbled tentatively.

Shiori gasped. "Did you hear that, Saorin? She just called me mommy!" she boasted, puffing her chest out with pride.

"What? No, she didn't," Saori retorted with a frown.

"Did too. Here, listen. Suama, say it again," Shiori gently urged the little dragon girl.

"Mo-wee!"

"And again."

"Mow-mee!"

"Almost there," Shiori encouraged her.

"Mom-my!"

This time, the twins both gasped in unison.

"Yeah! That's right! 'Mommy'! I'm your mommy, Suama!" Saori quickly said to the little dragon girl.

"Don't listen to her, Suama! *I'm* your mommy," Shiori protested.

They both spread their arms wide to give the little dragon girl a hug, but Suama dashed right past them and clung to my legs. She looked up at me and started whining softly.

“You want up?” I asked her.

She nodded. “Ai!”

“Okay, little one, here we go,” I said, lifting her up and putting her on my shoulders. High-pitched giggles escaped her mouth as she wrapped her little arms around my head. She seemed to really like being up high. The twins, on the other hand, were fuming.

“Hmph! It’s so *unfair* that you’re the only one who gets to hold her, bro!” Saori pouted.

“I wanna give little Suama a hug too!” Shiori whined, angrily puffing out her cheeks.

Their eyes full of envy, they both held out their arms toward me, as if trying to tell me to hand the little dragon girl over.

“What do you think, Suama?” I asked her. “Want one of them to carry you instead?”

“Me! She wants me! Mommy Saori!” Saori piped up.

“Come on, Suama. Say ‘Mommy Shiori,’” Shiori prompted.

The twins started to slowly walk toward us with their arms held out in front of them and manic smiles on their faces, looking every bit like zombies out of a science-fiction movie.

“No!” Suama yelled, and she tightened her grip around my head as if to emphasize she wasn’t going anywhere if she could help it.

Saori made a noise of sheer frustration. “Why are *you* the only one who gets to carry her, bro? We’re Suama’s mommies. We should get a turn too!”

“Mom-my?” Suama repeated.

“Exactly, Suama! We’re your ‘mommies,’” Shiori cooed at her. “It means we’re your mamas.”

The second these words left Shiori's mouth, Suama let out a high-pitched cry and thrashed about on my shoulders while shaking her head furiously from side to side, almost as if she was vehemently disagreeing with what Shiori had just said.

"Hey, what's wrong, Suama?" I asked, gently lifting her off my shoulders and cuddling her against my chest. She flung her arms around my neck and I rubbed her back to try to calm her down.

"Seems she didn't like you saying we were her 'mamas,' Shiorin," Saori pointed out.

I wondered why the word "mama" would upset Suama so much, when it suddenly hit me. When Stella came to pick up Aina earlier that evening, Suama had looked very sad that her friend had to go. Maybe she'd heard Aina call her mother "mama," and she associated that particular word with the sadness she'd felt when the older girl had to leave.

"Really? Suama, don't you like the word 'mama'? You prefer 'mommy,' is that it? Come on, tell Mommy Shiori what's wrong," Shiori said, urging the little girl to talk to her.

But Suama shook her head even more violently. "No! No!"

She pointed at the window and started whining loudly. She was still shaking her head and thrashing about in my arms, but her finger didn't seem to move an inch from where it was pointing.

"Suama? Is there someone outside that window?" I asked.

"Ma-ma!" she replied instantly.

"Huh?" I said dumbly.

"Ma-ma!" Suama repeated, her little finger still pointing to the exact same spot.

The Gigheena Forest. That was where she was pointing.

For a while, no one in the room uttered a word. I heard someone audibly swallow their saliva, but I was so utterly dumbfounded by this whole situation that I couldn't for the life of me tell if it had been me or one of my sisters.

“Ma-ma! Ma-ma!” Suama whined again.

“Suama...” I asked cautiously. “Is your mama in the forest?”

The little dragon girl beamed in response and treated me to a big nod, seemingly relieved that I’d finally understood what she’d been trying to say.

“Ai!”

Wait, Suama’s mom was in the forest *all along*?!

Chapter Sixteen: Asking Around (Part Two)

A few days later, a messenger from the Fairy’s Blessing guild came to inform me that Ney was back in town.

“Aina, could you hold down the fort for a while? I have to go over to the guild,” I said to the little girl as soon as the messenger had left.

She nodded. “Sure! Leave it to me, Mister Shiro!”

“Thanks. See you in a bit!” I said, and I started walking toward the door, but stopped before I reached it.

“Mister Shiro? Is something wrong?” Aina asked me, tilting her head to one side in confusion.

I spun on my heels and made a beeline for the tatami room up on the second floor. I scooped up the still-sleeping Suama, wrapped her in a bath towel, and headed back downstairs.

“I’m taking Suama with me, just in case,” I informed Aina, who was still watching me curiously.

“Oh, okay,” she said with a nod. “See you soon, then, Mister Shiro!”

And with that, I made my way to the Fairy’s Blessing guild with Suama fast asleep in my arms.



When I finally got there, I walked straight up to the reception desk and informed the new receptionist, Trell, that I’d come to see the guildmaster. She nodded and immediately ushered me into a back room.

“Please wait here. I’ll go get the guildmaster right away,” she informed me, then she bowed and left the room, the clack-clack of her footsteps echoing down the hallway.

I glanced around the room I’d been led into and saw that it was tastefully decorated with expensive-looking ornaments lined up on some shelves and

three sofas arranged in a U-shape around a table in the middle of the room. I gently lowered Suama onto one of these sofas and sat down beside her, though just as I was taking my seat, the little dragon girl opened her eyes and groaned sleepily. *Looks like someone's awake.*

She brought her hands up to her eyes and started rubbing them as she peered around the room. After a few seconds of scanning her surroundings, she froze and tilted her head to one side, probably feeling a little lost at waking up in a different room from the one she'd fallen asleep in.

"Pa-pa?" she murmured as she looked up at me and tightly wrapped her little arms around my midsection.

Waking up in an unfamiliar room must've given her a fright, poor thing. Hey, wait... I thought, realization suddenly hitting me. *Hold on a minute. She just called me papa, didn't she? Papa! What is this feeling? My chest suddenly feels all warm and fuzzy. Is that normal?*

"Everything's all right, Suama," I said, gently patting her head to reassure her, despite my own inner turmoil. "We're just here to see one of my friends, okay?"

That seemed to do the trick, as she flashed me a great big smile. "Ai!" she squeaked.

At that moment, someone knocked at the door.

"I'm coming in, Shiro," said a voice from the other side, and I instantly recognized it as Ney's. The door opened, and sure enough, Ney entered the room, followed by two other people. "Sorry for making you wait, Shiro," she said.

"Oh, it's all right. I didn't wait long at all," I quickly reassured her. "I should be the one apologizing for bothering you when you've only just come back from your expedition in the forest."

"No, it's fine. Don't worry about that. I have a few reports I need to fill out regarding what we found out on the expedition, but that can wait," Ney said as she sat down on the sofa opposite me. She looked at me, then down at Suama, a soft smile appearing on her face.

"Aren't you tired, though?" I asked.

“I am,” grunted the old dwarf who was still standing in the doorway. “I’m beat! The only thing that’ll fix me up is drinkin’ some of that booze of yers, Shiro.”

The dwarf—who I knew as Eldos, one of this world’s Sixteen Heroes—plonked himself down on the third sofa. So he’d been part of the expedition group too, huh?

“Thank you for all of your hard work, Eldos,” I said with a smile. “I’ll be sure to tell the drinking hall waitresses that all your drinks are on me tonight, so you can quaff to your heart’s content and relieve some of your fatigue.”

“Mighty thoughtful of ya, Shiro! I’ll take ya up on that,” Eldos boomed, punctuating his sentence with a deep, rumbling belly laugh.

He didn’t make any move to leave, though. I assumed he was probably curious about what I had to say to Ney and planned to stick around for the full duration of our conversation. Fine by me.

A little creature then flew over to me and hovered right in front of my face. “H-Hey, Shiro!” she said.

“Welcome back, boss,” I replied. “Good work out there in the forest.”

The (literally) tiny girl puffed her chest out with pride and her semitranslucent wings seemed to flap at an even faster rate than before. She was a fairy, one of the rarest creatures in this world, and her name was Patty Falulu. Oh, and she also happened to be my “boss.”

“Oh, it was a piece of cake! I could’ve done that ‘exploration’ thingy in my sleep if I’d wanted to!” she boasted.

“Wow, that’s amazing, boss. You’re so cool,” I said, praising her over and over.

“Aren’t I just?” she gloated. “It’s because I’m your bo—Hey, hold on a minute!” She suddenly interrupted herself midsentence and shook her head from side to side. “Shiro! What’s with this kid?!” she asked, pointing at Suama.

“What do you mean?” I said.

“D-Don’t play dumb! This kid...” Patty gasped. “Her magic’s *insane*!”

“Oh. Yeah, that’s what I thought you meant, but I wasn’t totally sure,” I replied.

“What do you mean? Y-You can’t *tell*?” Patty asked, frowning.

“Nope.”

Patty seemed in a real panic as she circled me and Suama, pointing at the little girl and repeatedly yelling “This kid!” and “Her magic!” and stuff like that. I wasn’t exactly what you’d call an expert when it came to fairies, but it seemed Patty was able to instantly assess how powerful someone’s magic was just by looking at them. Patty actually possessed incredibly powerful magic herself, but she had a tendency to instantly engage panic mode whenever she met someone with stronger powers than her own, as was the case at this particular moment. That told me Suama’s magic was even more powerful than Patty’s. Dragons really were something else, huh?

“Shiro!” Patty screeched when she’d eventually had enough of flying around us. “What *is* this kid?!”

Suama didn’t seem at all bothered by Patty repeatedly thrusting her tiny finger in her direction. Quite the opposite, actually. She looked extremely interested in Patty. She reached out toward the fairy to try and catch her, but Patty immediately flew away from the outstretched hand.

“Shiro!” Patty yelled again. “Sh-She’s trying to get me! She wants to *eat* me!”

“Oh, I don’t think that’s true. She probably just thinks you’re a doll or something and wants to play with you,” I said calmly.

“That’s *worse*!” Patty said as she skillfully evaded Suama’s little hand again before zipping off to the other side of the room. Which was the wrong move, as it turned out, because it made Suama even *more* intrigued about the little hovering creature. She hopped down off the sofa and started running after Patty. She was probably remembering how much fun she’d had playing tag with Aina a few days before, and wanted to play it with Patty.

“Wah!” the little dragon girl whooped happily as she tottered after the fairy to try to catch her.

“Give it up! I won’t let you catch me!” Patty shouted down at her.

“Unh!” Suama whined, but she carried on running after the fairy.

“Your magic’s impressive, but you’re really slow, aren’t you? You really think you can catch me like that?” Patty teased with a self-important smirk on her face. She seemed to have finally realized that Suama really was just a child in spite of her supposedly impressive magic. She started playing along with the little dragon girl’s attempts to catch her, even taunting her with the occasional “Over here!” and “Look, I’m all the way over here now!” It seemed my boss was pretty good at babysitting.

Ney, Eldos, and I simply watched the two of them play as the tiny little dragon girl tried to catch the even tinier fairy.

“She ain’t yer kid, is she?” Eldos asked me after a while.

“For some strange reason, everyone seems to assume she is,” I replied. “But no, she isn’t. I don’t even have a partner.”

“Ya don’t need one to make a kid,” the dwarf pointed out with a shrug.

“Do I look like I’m that kind of guy to you?” I said.

“Nah, ya don’t. Hell, I’m pretty sure yer’ve never even held a girl’s hand before,” Eldos joked, before laughing loudly again.

My shoulders dropped and I let out a deep sigh, disheartened by this rather accurate observation.

Ney chuckled softly. “I take it this little girl is the reason you wanted to speak to me?” she said.

I nodded. “Bingo. Her name is Suama, by the way.”

“Suama, huh? That’s a pretty name,” Ney said with a smile.

I chuckled. “My little sister came up with it. Anyway, we might find ourselves in a bit of a sticky situation because of Suama...” I said before trailing off.

“What do you mean? She’s so small and cute. How could she ever cause trouble for us?” Ney asked, a puzzled look on her face.

Ney and Eldos had only just returned from the forest, and it appeared neither my friends in Blue Flash nor Emille had managed to tell either of them about

Suama's true nature yet.

"Well, it's a bit complicated..." I mumbled. "Oh, but first, I want to apologize. I know I wasn't supposed to know about it, but I, uh, heard about the demons in the forest," I said sheepishly.

Ney raised an eyebrow. "I seem to remember telling the adventurers in no uncertain terms that they weren't to tell a soul about that particular matter. Well, I suppose in this instance, it's fine. You *are* one of the guild's partners, after all. I have a pretty good idea who told you about the demons, but I shall overlook it this time."

"Thank you so much, Ney," I said, breathing a sigh of relief. "If I might add, the adventurers who told me about it only did so because I was being *very* insistent. It's entirely my fault."

"You really are kind, Shiro. If it had been me in the shoes of these unnamed adventurers, I imagine I would have had a difficult time not blurting out all of the guild's secrets to you too," she chuckled, though her expression quickly turned serious again. "Anyway, back to the topic at hand. What's this issue that supposedly relates to Suama?"

"I don't even really know where to begin. Let's see..." I mused aloud. "Well, it all started about twenty days ago. I was strolling around the Gigheena Forest with my little sisters when..."

I gave Ney and Eldos a brief rundown of everything that had happened since that fateful day in the forest. I started by telling them about how the twins and I had stumbled upon a giant egg in the forest, which we were subsequently told was an ebirasornis egg. Of course, we found out that wasn't the case when a baby dragon hatched out of said egg. The dragon in question then morphed into a human, who seemed to believe I was her father.

"Circling back to the matter of the demons in the forest, Raiya and I might have figured out what they're doing there," I said, then proceeded to explain our theory that the demons might actually be after Suama.

Once I was done talking, Eldos let out a deep, pensive sigh. "So this kid's a dragon, huh?" he mused. Even a veteran hero like Eldos seemed shocked to learn of Suama's true identity.

Ney, meanwhile, didn't say a word. She brought a hand up to her chin and closed her eyes, deep in thought. A good two minutes passed before she opened them again. "You said you picked up the egg about twenty days ago, correct?" she asked, as if to make sure she'd heard right.

"Yes, I did," I replied, nodding.

"I see," she said, before heaving a deep sigh. "So it *was* a dragon egg the demons were transporting that day."

"Huh? 'That day'? What do you mean?" I asked, utterly bewildered by this comment.

"She's talkin' 'bout the little scuffle we had with some demons a few weeks back," Eldos answered with a shrug.

"Huh? A 'scuffle'?" I repeated. "Y-You mean you actually *fought* the demons?!" My jaw dropped to the floor.

"Wasn't really that much of a fight," he said nonchalantly.

"What happened?" I asked, flabbergasted.

"Allow me to explain everything from the beginning," Ney said. She paused briefly to clear her throat, then started recounting the events of the past few weeks. "When we got word there were demons in the forest, we immediately set off on an expedition to find them. I told everyone here at the guild that we were heading to the ruins to aid some of our adventurers in bringing their hauls back to Ninoritch, but that was just a pretext to go into the forest."

Long story short, this is what had happened: Ney had used her authority as guildmaster to secretly form an expedition party composed of the cream of the crop of the guild's adventurers in order to track down the demons in the forest, and as a bit of extra insurance, she had asked Patty to act as a guide for them. It had taken them about half a day to make all the necessary preparations for an excursion into the forest, and as soon as everyone was ready, they had departed. They had only been in the forest for two days when they stumbled across a group of demons. That was how close the demons had been to Ninoritch.

It was nighttime when Patty suddenly sensed creatures with strong magical

abilities flying overhead. She informed the expedition party's magician, who immediately used Farsight to get a better look at the flying creatures, and sure enough, a group of nine winged demons was soaring through the night sky right above the band of adventurers, their forms almost entirely obscured in the darkness. Ney called out to them, but the demons completely ignored her. Faced with no other choice, Ney ordered Patty to use her magic to stop the group of demons from going any farther. The demons couldn't dodge Patty's spell in time and ended up crashing to the ground, but that wasn't enough to knock them out, so the adventurers immediately grabbed their weapons and engaged the demons in battle. Though surprisingly, after only a few blows, the demons began to retreat farther and farther into the darkness of the forest, and the expedition team had no choice but to chase them.

"Thinking back, I clearly saw them carrying *something* on that night," Ney said gravely.

"And by 'something,' you mean the dragon egg I found, don't you?" I asked.

"I'm almost positive that's what it was," she confirmed with a nod. "They must have dropped it when Patty hit them with her magic."

"That'd make a lot of sense," Eldos said. "I ain't ever seen demons fleein' that fast in my entire life. Yeah, they got hit by a surprise attack, but that sure as hell never deterred 'em from fightin' before. But if they'd dropped something *precious*—like a dragon egg, for instance—that's a whole other story. I mean, if you attacked me while I was carryin' around a dragon egg and I dropped it, ya can bet I'd be panickin' too!" he guffawed.

"I see. Still, I'm impressed the egg didn't break after literally falling from the sky," I said.

"Hm? Ya don't know 'bout dragon eggs, kid? The shell of a dragon egg is so rock hard, even swingin' a hammer at it with all yer strength won't make a dent," Eldos informed me. "It's one of the most sought-after types of monster loot, 'cause ya can make armor out of it that's basically unbreakable."

"Dragon eggs are seriously that hard?" I said, my eyes widening in surprise.

Aw, rats, I thought. If I'd known that, I would've just rolled the egg all the way to Ninoritch instead of carrying it! My poor arms endured all that pain for

nothing!

“At any rate, I think I understand what’s going on now,” I said.

If my theory was correct, the timeline of events would go as follows: a group of demons transporting a dragon egg gets attacked by Ney and her party, causing them to accidentally drop it in the forest. The demons try to escape, but Ney’s party runs after them, preventing them from retrieving the egg. Then, a couple of days later, Shiori and Saori accidentally stumble across the egg and the rest, as they say, is history.

“It all makes sense now,” I muttered, nodding. “So those demons really are after Suama...”

“It seems the likeliest explanation, yes,” Ney agreed. “First the demons appearing in the forest, then you stumbling across the egg...” She paused briefly, then shook her head. “No, it can’t be a coincidence. Especially if we take into account the fact that this dragon can turn itself into a human, which means it must be an extremely rare and very powerful type of dragon. I’m afraid you might be right, Shiro.”

“I agree,” Eldos grunted.

The two of them shifted their gaze to Suama, who was still playing tag with Patty, blissfully unaware of the situation being discussed.

“So they’re after her, are they?” Ney mused, sounding quite deflated.

“I don’t want the demons to get their hands on her,” I said resolutely.

“Me neither,” Ney concurred. “I’d never willingly hand over such a powerful dragon to the demons. That would basically be the same as asking for the hume race to be wiped out.”

“Damn right,” Eldos said, nodding. “I’ve fought my fair share of demons in my time, and lemme tell ya, they’re absolute *monsters*. Ain’t no way we can let ’em have this dragon.”

“So...” I started, then glanced at Ney as I trailed off, but I needn’t have worried because I could see the determination in her jade-green eyes.

“The Fairy’s Blessing guild will protect you and Suama,” she said firmly.

“Please let me know if there’s anything we can do for you, Shiro. If it’s in my power, I shall see to it.”

“Thank you so much, Ney!” It felt like a huge weight had just been lifted off my chest.

“There’s really no need to thank me,” she said, shaking her head. “This is nothing compared to all that you’ve done for this guild.”

“What are you talking about? It’s the other way around. I can’t even count on both hands the number of times I’ve had to come to you guys for help.”

Ney chuckled. “You really are a humble man, aren’t you? Well then, Mr. Modest...” she started, but she trailed off before finishing her sentence.

“Yes?” I prompted.

“Is there anything the guild can help you with regarding Suama?”

I let out a pensive “Hmmm...” and tried to think of something I might need help with.

“Oh, I know,” I said after a little while. “Every night, Suama looks out through the window at the forest. She just points at it and says ‘Mama!’ over and over for several minutes, almost as if she’s missing her mother.”

“So even dragons miss their mothers, huh?” Ney mused.

“Now, hold on a minute,” Eldos jumped in. “Ya said yer’ve been raisin’ this dragon girlie from the moment she hatched out of that egg ya found, didn’t ya? So how could she have any memories of her mother?”

“Yup, that’s exactly my issue with it,” I said. “I was there when she hatched out of the egg. She shouldn’t even know she has a mom.”

“Yet she can still sense where her mother is...” Eldos muttered with a frown.

“Exactly,” I said, agreeing with the dwarf’s theory.

Eldos paused and hummed in thought before continuing. “Most likely explanation is she possesses some sort of homing instinct,” he deduced.

“That’s the same conclusion I’d come to.”

Eldos and I looked at each other and nodded upon seeing that we were in

agreement.

“Shiro, Eldos, if I may ask, what exactly *is* this ‘homing instinct’ you’re talking about?” Ney queried, looking a little lost.

“Huh? C’mon, girly, yer a guildmaster! Ya don’t even know what a homing instinct is? Even Shiro knows ‘bout it and he ain’t even an adventurer!” Eldos teased her.

“I might be a guildmaster, but that doesn’t mean I know *everything*,” Ney said, pouting slightly.

Wow, I think this is the first time I’ve ever seen Ney sulk, I thought before getting a hold of myself and focusing on the matter at hand again.

“The homing instinct is the ability certain animals possess—and probably some monsters too, I guess—to find their nests or their territory, even when they don’t know exactly where they are,” I explained. “Some insects have it, as well as certain fish, and even cats and dogs. Back where I’m from, you often hear stories of dogs traveling great distances and somehow managing to find their way back to their masters. No one really knows exactly how the homing instinct works, but it’s pretty darn impressive.” I paused and turned to Patty. “Hey, boss,” I called over to her.

Patty had been playing tag with Suama this whole time. She flew over to me, breathing erratically and with sweat pouring down her face. “Wh-What...” she panted. “What is it, Shiro?”

Suama toddled back to the sofa as well and plonked herself down next to me, then laid her head in my lap, ready to take a nap.

“So like I just told Ney and Eldos, Suama always looks out at the forest at night and calls for her mom,” I said, bringing her up to speed.

“Her ma, huh?” Patty mused. “And? What’s that got to do with me?”

“Well, you know the Gigheena Forest pretty well, right?”

“Duh. I was born and raised there.”

“So I was wondering if you maybe knew where Suama’s mom might be,” I said.

“And how would I know that? There are tons of dragons living in the forest. I dunno which one’s her mom,” she said.

“Wait, *what?!*” I exclaimed, utterly dumbfounded by this new piece of information. And it seemed I wasn’t the only one.

“Is that true?” Ney asked the fairy, her jaw gaping.

“There are *dragons* in the forest?” Eldos had a similar look of disbelief on his face at what Patty had just said, his eyes almost popping out of his skull.

“Patty, please could you show us where these dragons are?” Ney said, taking a map out of her Storage Pouch and opening it out on the table. It was a hand-drawn map of the Gigheena Forest, with Ninoritch marked as far over to the left as it could get and the rest of the paper all forest. The ponds and rivers within the forest had been sketched onto the map, as well as the location of all the ruins the adventurers had discovered up until that point, thanks to Patty’s help.

“Sure,” the little fairy said with a nod, and she hovered over the map. “I haven’t encountered all of them yet, but grandpa—I mean, the clan leader told me about the ones I haven’t seen.”



She paused as she studied the map, then pointed to a specific spot on it.

“The Forest Dragon lives here. I’ve seen that one before and it seemed pretty calm. Not aggressive in the slightest, in fact. Then...” She scanned the map again. “That’s the Earth Dragon’s territory and—”

“The *Earth Dragon*?!” Eldos interrupted her. “That’s a really strong dragon, ain’t it?”

“Yup!” Patty confirmed. “Gran—Um, the clan leader told me I shouldn’t go near it under any circumstances. Apparently, if you enter its territory, it’ll gobble you up and leave nothing behind!”

I ignored the rest of the heated conversation between Patty and Eldos about dragons and turned to Ney.

“Ney, could this Earth Dragon be Suama’s mother, do you think?” I asked her.

But she simply tilted her head to one side with a skeptical look on her face. “Hard to say. The Earth Dragon is undoubtedly powerful, but I wouldn’t say it’s the *most* powerful dragon out there. I don’t *believe* a child it sired would have the ability to turn into a human at such a young age, but I can’t say that for definite.”

“Hm...” I mused. “So there are all different types of dragons, huh?”

Patty had resumed her presentation, excitedly pointing at different spots on the map. “And the Green Dragon lives *here*. And see this deep gorge right here? That’s apparently where the Rock Dragon lives!”

Eldos, Ney, and I were totally speechless. *Aw, c’mon now!* I thought. *That’s way too many dragons for one forest!* It was plain to see from Ney’s incredibly stiff expression that she hadn’t been aware there were so many dragons in the forest either. I’d need more than two hands to even count the number of dragons Patty had already named! I let out a deep, pensive sigh and allowed my gaze to rest on Suama, who had her head in my lap and was nodding off. Then a thought occurred to me.

“Hey, boss,” I said, interrupting Patty’s little dragon map tour.

“Yeah?”

“Um...” I paused as I gently swept Suama’s bangs aside and pointed at the gem embedded in her forehead. “Is there a dragon that has a gem like this in its forehead?”

“A dragon with a shiny gem in its forehead?” she mused.

“Yeah. You ever heard of something like that?”

“I have, actually! Gran—I mean, the clan leader told me about it once!” she said, puffing out her chest with pride. “I think its name was...”—she paused as she tried to remember—“the Im...”—pause—“the Immortal Dragon! That’s it!”

The second these words came out of Patty’s mouth, Ney and Eldos shot up out of their seats. “The *Immortal Dragon*?!” they both yelled in unison, their jaws hitting the floor. This day had been full of surprises, but it definitely seemed like this was the biggest shock of all.

“P-Patty...” Ney stuttered. “The Immortal Dragon—the dragon that’s said to have roamed the world since ancient times—*lives* in the Gigheena Forest?!”

Her expression was so fierce, Patty couldn’t help squeaking out a scared little “Eek!” and flying around behind me to hide. “I-It does, yes!” she said with a nod, her tiny head peeking out over my hair. “That’s what gran—what the clan leader told me! He told me, ‘The Immortal Dragon lives in the forest.’ I mean it! He really did!”

Ouch. Patty, do you mind not screeching in my ears like that?

“Wait, hold on a minute, boss,” I said. “This, um, Immortal Dragon, was it? Is it really such a powerful dragon?”

“Shiro, are you saying you’ve never heard of it before?” Ney asked, gawking at me.

“I’m not really all that familiar with dragons. Sorry,” I said sheepishly.

“Don’t ya worry, kid. It’s normal yer’ve never heard of it. Other than us adventurers, no one knows about *that* dragon,” Eldos assured me.

According to Eldos, the Immortal Dragon was one of this world’s five most powerful dragons, and as its name suggested, it was rumored to be able to live forever. It possessed an inexhaustible supply of magic, which it used to

maintain its body, so as long as it never ran out of magic, it could basically live until the world itself ended.

“I had no idea such a dragon existed,” I said, shocked by this revelation.

“The Immortal Dragon can basically live as long as the Phoenix, one of the most well-known mythical beasts out there. *And* I heard its flesh and its blood even have the power to heal wounds and cure illnesses,” Eldos said.

“There’s also a theory that the Elixir, a mythical remedy supposedly able to cure all types of ailments, is made with the blood of the Immortal Dragon,” Ney added.

The image of Suama licking Aina’s wound a few days before floated up in my mind. A single lick from her tongue had been enough to completely heal the sizable gash on the little girl’s knee. We all remained silent for a little while, our gazes firmly fixed on Suama, who had been on the verge of nodding off, but with all eyes in the room suddenly on her, she was starting to get a bit restless.

“Pa-pa,” she whined as she sat up and wrapped her arms around my neck in such a way that she ended up facing away from everyone else.

“Shhh, it’s okay, Suama,” I reassured her and tried to soothe her by gently rubbing her back.

Ney seemed to be deep in thought. “Patty,” she said after a few seconds.

The little fairy came out from her hiding place behind my head and landed on my shoulder. “Wh-What is it?”

“Does your clan leader know where the Immortal Dragon lives?” Ney asked her.

“O-Of course he does! Gran—I mean, the clan leader knows *everything* about the forest!”

Ney nodded at this, a serious look on her face. “Then I have a request for you,” she told Patty.

“M-Me?” Patty stuttered.

“Yes. Could you please go into the forest and ask your clan leader where exactly this Immortal Dragon lives?”

“You want me to ask gran—the clan leader where it lives?” Patty repeated back to Ney with a frown on her face.

“Yes. Would that be possible?” Ney asked.

Patty crossed her arms in front of her chest and let out a long “Hmmm...”

Patty’s relationship with the other fairies was complicated, to say the least. I figured that must be why the idea of going to ask them for something made her so hesitant. It had all stemmed from a misunderstanding, but that didn’t mean Patty was ready to forgive them for the way they’d treated her all these years, which explained why she hadn’t gone back to the fairies’ dwelling once since coming to Ninoritch. Despite making up with the fairies’ clan leader, she was still basically a runaway.

“Hm...” Patty said, hesitating again.

“Please, Patty,” Ney said, bowing in front of the little fairy.

But Patty wasn’t budging. She just let out another, even longer “Hmmm...”

“C’mon, Patty, do it for Shiro’s kiddo,” Eldos said.

“Hmmm...” came the response.

“Boss, please,” I joined in. “You’re the only one who can do this.” Like Ney, I bowed in front of the little fairy from my seated position.

And would you believe it? Suama also turned to the fairy and bowed while babbling something that sounded like it *might* be “please.” Of course, she probably had no idea what was going on and was just copying me, but it seemed to win Patty over.

“Oh, f-fine!” the fairy relented, putting her hands on her hips. “Fine! I’ll go ask gran—the clan leader to tell me where the Immortal Dragon is!”

Ney nodded before turning to me. “Shiro, what do you plan on doing once we have learned the whereabouts of the Immortal Dragon—or rather, of Suama’s mother?” she asked a little hesitantly.

By contrast, I didn’t hesitate for even a single second before answering.

“We will return Suama to her real mother.”



“Are you sure?” Ney asked, taking a step toward me. “This is the Immortal Dragon we’re talking about here. If we return Suama, there’s a very good chance you’ll never get to see her again.”

I didn’t say anything to this, instead letting my gaze land on Suama, who was staring at me. Like earlier, I got this really warm, fuzzy feeling in my chest. I hugged the little dragon girl tight.

“To be honest with you, I had been hoping that Suama could stay with us forever,” I said, running my fingers through her hair. “My sisters adore her, and she’s like a little sister to Aina. She’s gotten pretty attached to me too.”

“Shiro...” Ney breathed.

“I really, really hoped beyond hope that she would stay by my side for the rest of my life, because I love her deeply. We all do. The twins do, Aina does, and so do I. We all really, really love her. But...” I paused because I had to muster up all of my resolve in order to utter my next words. “But if one of Suama’s *real* parents is out there, waiting for her to come back, then I want to help them reunite. I want Suama to live happily with her mother. So...”

I paused again and looked from Ney, to Eldos, and then to Patty, before letting my gaze drop to the little dragon girl in my arms.

“I want to reunite her with her mom,” I summarized. “And the sooner, the better.”

“A-Are you sure about this, Shiro? D-Don’t you wanna keep her around for a little while longer?” Patty asked me.

“I’ve made up my mind, boss,” I replied. “Besides, I don’t think waiting will do me any favors. I have to let her go before I get too attached to her.”

Well, I thought to myself, before I get more attached than I already am, that is.

“I understand, Shiro,” Ney said softly, her gaze full of compassion, though she quickly wrestled her expression back into a serious one again. “All right. Patty, I apologize for asking you to do this after we’ve just gotten back from our

expedition in the forest, but can you please go to the fairies' clan leader and ask him where exactly the Immortal Dragon resides?"

"Sure, I can do that," the little fairy said with a nod.

Ney seemed fairly satisfied with this reply, but added, "Could I also ask you to take us to the dragon's location once you know it?"

"Well, isn't that the whole point of me asking gran—uh, the clan leader about the dragon in the first place? Don't worry. I'll guide you there. I should be back from the fairies' dwelling in about, hm..."—Patty thought about it for a second—"Two days, I reckon."

"Two days?!" Ney, Eldos, and I repeated in shock. It had taken us three days to simply *get* to the fairies' dwelling when we'd gone there to take care of a nearby flying rhinoceros beetle nest, yet here Patty was, claiming she could go there *and* back in just two days?

The fairy chuckled self-importantly. "I can make it to the dwelling in a single day if I want!"

"Oh, I get it," I said. "It's because you won't have to slow your pace so we can keep up this time, right?"

Patty proved my theory by fluttering her wings even faster than normal to show off. "Exactly, Shiro!" she said with a smug nod.

"Well, at any rate, thank you, Patty," Ney said.

"Yeah, thanks, boss," I added.

"N-No need to thank me! I'm Shiro's boss, after all. I'm just doing my job!" the little fairy said quickly, before clearing her throat, seemingly embarrassed.

Ney, Eldos, and I couldn't help smiling at the fairy's awkwardness, though Ney instantly regained her composure. "Shiro, I shall put together an expedition team composed of our very best adventurers. The moment Patty gets back from the fairies' dwelling, we shall head out into the forest and return Suama to her mother," she informed me.

"Gotcha," I replied.

"May I request that you accompany us?" she asked.

“Of course!” I said, nodding vigorously. “I really want to tag along. Suama...” I paused briefly as I tried to find the right words. “Suama’s family,” I said softly.

“The demons might try to attack us, though,” Ney pointed out, as if to test my resolve.

But the prospect of that happening didn’t give me even a second’s hesitation. “If that happens, I’ll grab Suama and we’ll go hide somewhere. I was great at hide-and-seek as a kid, you know.”

She chuckled. “Well, I see you’ve made up your mind. Though rest assured, in the event of an attack, we’ll do everything in our power to protect you and Suama.”

“Thank you. I have complete faith in you,” I said, looking her square in the eye.

Eldos chimed in. “Ya youngsters can’t beat those demons on yer own. Listen up, Shiro. Gimme ten bottles of booze every day we’re on the road, and I’ll protect that little whippersnapper of yers. Whaddaya say?”

“No offense, but I wouldn’t trust you to protect her if you drank that much,” I said soberly. “Two bottles.”

“Aw, c’mon, kid. Don’t be stingy! How ’bout eight?”

“Nope.”

“Seven, then!”

“How about this: no drinking while you’re guarding Suama, *but* as soon as we get back, I’ll give you three bottles of any alcohol you want for every single day we spend in the forest,” I suggested.

“A-Any booze I want?” Eldos spluttered. “Even bourbon?!”

“Of course, if that’s what you want,” I said.

“What about Spirytus?!”

“Sure. Well, as long as you don’t go drinking too much of it at once, of course.”

The dwarf roared with laughter. “Then we got ourselves a deal! I’ll tag along

and protect the kiddo for ya.”

So not only had I secured the support of Ney and the Fairy’s Blessing guild, but I also had a very reliable private bodyguard for Suama. Now that we’d decided on everyone’s roles for our upcoming expedition to take Suama back to her mother, Patty appeared to attempt to fire herself up.

“All righty! I’m off to the dwelling!” she announced.

“Huh? You’re going right now, boss?” I asked, somewhat surprised by her enthusiasm.

The little fairy smirked at me. “Well, the sooner the better, right? Before you get all attached or whatever,” she said with a shrug.

“Boss...” I breathed. “Thank you so much, boss! I’ll leave it in your hands, then.”

She giggled. “I’m simply doing my job as your boss. After all, I can’t just stand by and do nothing while my underling is in trouble, can I?”

“Hell yeah! That’s my boss! You’re so cool and reliable, boss!” I whooped in an exaggerated manner.

“S-Stop that! Don’t say stuff like that! I-It’s embarrassing!” she protested, going bright red.

And with that, she zoomed off. By her own estimate, she would be back in two days, and then we’d all head off into the forest to take Suama to her mother.

Chapter Seventeen: Family Meeting

That night, after closing the store, I told Aina and the twins I had something important to tell them and took them up to the break room on the second floor. The second their backs hit the sofa, the twins asked me almost the exact same question in unison.

“What is it you wanna talk about, bro-bro?”

“What do you wanna tell us, bro?”

Aina silently looked across at Suama—who had made herself at home in my lap—then up at me, and it was as if something clicked in her brain.

“Mister Shiro, does this have something to do with little Su?” she asked.

I nodded gravely. “I’m thinking of taking her to her real mother,” I announced after a pause.

I gave them all a rundown of my earlier conversation with Ney, Patty, and Eldos, though I omitted the bit about the demons in the forest. I didn’t want to ruin the twins’ experience of this other world, especially as they were having such a good time here, and it would have broken Aina’s heart to learn demons were after Suama. She’d grown very attached to the little dragon girl, and treated her like a little sister. But even despite these omissions, the twins didn’t take the news particularly well.

“You can’t be *serious*, bro!” Saori exclaimed, shooting daggers at me.

“What are you even talking about, bro-bro? Suama’s *our* baby!” Shiori whined.

Saori nodded. “Shiorin’s right! *We’re* the ones raising her!”

“We can’t just throw her out, poor thing,” Shiori added.

“You *have* to rethink this, bro! If you go through with giving up Suama, I’ll never talk to you ever, ever again!” Saori threatened.

“Same here! I’ll hate you for the rest of my life!” Shiori added.

“In fact, you won’t be our brother anymore!”

“We’ll take out all the photos of you in the family album and *burn* them.”

The two of them proceeded to boo me loudly to get their point across. Their words were like arrows to my heart, especially when they decided to add insult to injury by decrying me as “lame.” *C’mon, Shiro, buck up. You’re the older brother here. You have to stand your ground!*

“Please listen to me. One of my good friends might know where Suama’s real mother is,” I said, then paused and waited to see what the twins’ reaction would be to this, but Shiori simply stared at me blankly, while Saori’s brow furrowed. Their eyes told me to continue, though, so I did. “Every night, Suama looks out through the window at the forest. You’ve noticed it too, haven’t you? I think it might be because of some sort of homing instinct she has. She knows her mother is out there in the forest.”

“B-But...” Saori protested. “Maybe she’s wrong!”

“Yeah!” Shiori said with a hopeful nod. “She’s still little, so how could she even know in the first place? She’s probably just looking out at the forest for no particular reason.”

I sighed. “Don’t lie. I know you’ve realized too. Her mom lives in that forest, and Suama wants to go back to her,” I explained. “She doesn’t want to stay with us.”

Both of the twins chewed their bottom lips and looked away from me, causing me to throw my hands up in the air, exasperated by their reaction, before turning to Aina.

“Aina,” I said to get the little girl’s attention.

“Hm?”

“What do you think I should do?” I asked her gently.

“Um...” she mumbled before trailing off.

She sat there deep in thought for a long time. A very, very long time.

“I, uh...” she said, trying again.

Looking seconds away from bursting into tears, she balled up her little hands into fists and glanced at Suama.

“I love my mama,” she said after a little while. “And I think little Su must love her mama a lot too.”

“Yeah?” I said, nodding to encourage her to continue.

“And I’m little Su’s big sister, so I have to help her whenever she’s sad or in trouble.”

I nodded again.

“So, um...” She paused. “I think little Su should go back to her mama,” she concluded, her eyes brimming with tears. It was obvious she didn’t want the little dragon girl to go, but she was putting Suama’s own feelings first, like a real big sister would.

“Okay,” I said softly, before adding, “You really have become Suama’s big sister, haven’t you?”

Aina wiped her tears away with her sleeve, giggled proudly, and flashed me a broad smile. Suama, on the other hand, had started fussing in my lap. She was gazing out the window and softly whining for her mother. This seemed to make up the twins’ minds for them.

“Okay, *fine*,” Saori declared out of the blue. “I *guess* we can give her back to her *real* mom.”

“You’ll get to see your real mama very soon, Suama,” Shiori cooed at the little dragon girl.

It seemed the two of them had finally agreed—albeit very, *very* reluctantly—to let me reunite Suama with her mother. Once that was all dealt with, I asked Aina if she wanted to stay the night, and she happily agreed.

“Little Su, do you wanna sleep in my bed?” Aina asked the little dragon girl.

“Ai!”

“Suama, look! I made some space for you in my bed,” Saori said, trying to lure Suama to come and sleep cuddling her.

“Ai!”

Then came Shiori’s attempt to coax Suama to share with her. “Suama, let’s go night-night together.”

“Ai!”

For the next few minutes, the twins engaged in a verbal war over which one of them would get to share their futon with Suama.

Chapter Eighteen: A Sudden Storm

The next morning, Aina and I were getting the shop ready for opening—wiping down the counters, lining the items up on the shelves, the usual—while the twins were playing with Suama, when all of a sudden, what had been shaping up to be a nice, peaceful morning was disrupted by someone barging their way into the store. The noise of the door being thrown open and slamming against the wall took Aina completely by surprise, and the little girl instantly spun on her heels to see who had rushed in.

“M-Miss Emille?” she said in surprise.

Yup, that’s right. Our mystery visitor was Emille. Her breathing ragged, she scanned the room, and the second she laid eyes on me, she rushed toward me.

“Mister! We have a problem! A *huuuge* problem!” she cried, grabbing me by the shoulders with a haunted look on her face.

“Wh-What’s wrong?” I asked, completely taken aback.

“A few days ago! At the guild! We got a request! Someone asked us to look for a giant egg they’d lost!” she spluttered.

“R-Really? A giant egg, you say—Hold on!” I yelped as my brain caught up with what was being said. “Are you *serious*?!”

“Yes! *Dead* serious!”

“Tell me everything,” I urged her.

“I will! It’s the whole reason I came all the way over here,” she said. Still a little out of breath, she started telling me exactly what had happened. “So you know how the GM was out in the forest for the past couple of weeks, yeah? Well, while she was away, I got Trell to do all the receptionist work.”

I didn’t say a word, but my face obviously betrayed my feelings about this because Emille shot me a quizzical look.

“Hm? What’s wrong, mister? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“It’s nothing,” I lied. “Carry on.”

“Hey, I know what you’re thinking,” Emille said. “And just so you know, I did it for her own good!”

Aina tilted her head to one side in confusion at this. “You made her do all of *your* work for her own good?” the little girl said, puzzled.

“Well, of *course*!” Emille exclaimed as if this should be obvious. “You’re too little to know these sorts of things yet, Aina, but the best way of turning a useless newbie into a full-fledged employee is to give them as much experience as possible! So the reason I gave her all my work was so she could get better at her job, that’s all! I’m just that nice. You don’t come across people as kind as me too often, you know.”

The twins blinked at each other and started whispering between themselves.

“Did you hear that, Shiorin? That’s abuse of power right there! This is the first time I’ve ever seen it in real life!”

“So crappy coworkers exist in this world too, huh?” Shiori whispered back.

“A-wu?” piped up the little dragon girl.

“Suama, you must come and tell me if you ever have to deal with someone like her, okay? I’ll punch them for you,” Saori said to the little dragon girl.

“Ai!”

“And I’ll give them a huge slap across the face,” Shiori added.

With her superior bunny hearing, Emille surely must’ve heard the twins’ comments, but she evidently decided to completely ignore them and carry on from where she’d left off. “Anyway, back to the topic at hand. So Trell was the only one working at the reception desk for a while, and that half-wit accepted a commission from someone who was looking for a giant egg they’d supposedly lost!”

To cut a long story short, the chain of events went as follows: while Ney was away, Emille had delegated all of her receptionist duties to Trell, the guild’s newest addition, and because she basically had to do the work of two people all by herself, poor Trell quickly found herself swamped. It was then that someone

came in with a rather peculiar job for the guild.

“According to Trell, the second this person walked into the guildhall, all of the adventurers started whispering to each other in a panic, due to how ominous this person looked,” Emille explained.

“Ominous? Did this person have some sort of black aura around them or something? Or did this mysterious figure look like, I don’t know, some kind of demon?” I joked.

But even though I’d said it tongue-in-cheek, to my surprise, Emille nodded. “Trell said that, based on appearance alone, she was convinced the person was a demon at first.”

Apparently, as soon as this person crossed the threshold into the guildhall, everyone grew incredibly restless, even the more experienced adventurers present. But this mysterious figure had paid no attention whatsoever to the adventurers in the room, instead walking straight up to the reception desk, glaring at Trell, and saying, “I want you to find an egg I dropped in the forest. I will pay to get it back.”

Poor Trell had been frozen in fear, but despite appearances, this mysterious person didn’t seem to have any bad intentions, so she mustered up all of her courage and started processing the request, which was subsequently posted on the guild’s quest board the following day.

“Here’s the request that idiot Trell accepted,” Emille said, producing a piece of paper from her breast pocket. It read:

Request: Retrieval of a lost egg (or information about it)

Client: A very scary-looking person

Reward: A lot of red magic crystals!

Information: I dropped an egg in the forest. It is a large egg and will probably require the use of both arms to carry it. I am offering a reward to whoever finds it. I also welcome information about the egg’s whereabouts. Find it.

My hands started shaking as I read the request form. The reward in particular caught my attention. Red magic crystals? I was sure I'd already heard those exact words before, but *where*? I decided it was best not to dwell on it, because there were more important things to worry about at present.

"Emille, this is..." I mumbled, before trailing off in shock.

"It's exactly what you're thinking, mister! A demon came all the way to the guild to post a request to find that egg!"

I paused. "Have you told Ney about this?" I asked.

"Of *course* not!" Emille said, shaking her head in horror. "The first thing that pigheaded GM's gonna ask is why Trell was manning reception alone that day. Then she'd know I was slacking off!"

"Huh? Are you actually serious right now?" I couldn't believe my ears. "What do you think is more important here: that a demon just waltzed into the guildhall, or that Ney will learn about you playing hooky?!"

"Well, the latter, obviously," she replied in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Are you an idiot or something?!" I yelled at her.

"I'm not an idiot! Don't call me an idiot!" she pouted and started punching me repeatedly in the chest. Seriously, this damn bunny...

Anyway, I didn't have time to waste on her antics. I needed to get to the bottom of this, and quickly. Someone—most likely a demon—had come all the way to the guild to ask them to look for the egg. I definitely had to tell Ney about this. She could get some adventurers together, lure the demon to the guild by claiming the egg had been found, then capture said demon. But wait, wouldn't the demons anticipate something like that?

I was deep in thought when Emille's voice yanked me back to reality. "Mister, I wasn't done talking!" she bawled.

"Huh?"

"You came to the guild to get the egg appraised a few weeks ago, didn't you? With a *girl*," she said, spitting out the last word like it was poison.

"I-I did, yeah. I went there with Saori," I said, jabbing my thumb in the

direction of the girl in question.

“Well, it just so happens that one of the adventurers who saw you that day found the reward so enticing, the louse sold you out,” Emille continued. “That stupid fool told the client about you!”

“Wh-What?! Are you serious?” I cried. “An adventurer told the demon about me?!”

“Yes! Here, take a look at the request form again. You see the reward there? Those red magic crystals? Well, those things are *insanely* valuable. They sell for the same amount as mithril! And that’s why...” She paused and took a deep breath. “The adventurer not only told the client that you had the egg, but explained all about your shop and how you spend most of your time here! That rat told the demon *everything!*” she blurted out without stopping for breath once, her hands balled up into fists.

It took my brain a little while to actually process her words. When I’d taken the egg to the guild to get it appraised, there had naturally been plenty of adventurers around, and now I was learning that one of them had sold me out.

“Crap...” I muttered under my breath.

This supposedly super-duper scary demon knew I had the egg. And what was worse, this demon knew where I lived. This was really bad. For me *and* for Suama.

“E-Emille, do you know when this happened?” I asked.

“When what happened?”

“When that adventurer contacted the—”

Clang, clang!

The word “demon” didn’t make it out of my mouth before I was interrupted by the ringing of the bell above the shop’s front door as someone came in.

“I’ve heard that the egg I lost is here,” the figure began. “Hm? Oh, you are...”

“Y-You’re...”

There in the doorway stood a tall woman in a cloak.

“It’s Shiro, right?” she said, her red eyes firmly fixed on me.

“Celes...” I breathed.

So that was why I’d felt this strong sense of déjà vu when reading the reward on the request form. I actually had a red magic crystal in my possession, and it was Celes who had given it to me. Who would’ve known that the thing she’d been searching for all this time was the egg I’d picked up in the forest?

Chapter Nineteen: Celesdia

“So you had it in your possession all along? To think that what I’ve been searching for day and night for the past few weeks would be right here...” she said, a self-deprecating smile appearing on her lips.

So Celes was the owner of the egg. I had already pretty much guessed she wasn’t a hume, but a demon? I couldn’t believe it. I didn’t *want* to believe it. But then I noticed the way she was looking at me, like I was nothing more than a pebble on the side of the road, and that’s when I understood. She wasn’t the same as us. That look in her eye was proof of that. She really was a demon, and her presence was imposing. So much so, in fact, Emille—who was standing right next to me—was shaking like a leaf, and the twins seemed to be in a similar state of panic. They probably hadn’t realized this woman was the one Saori had put makeup on at Beauty Amata only a few days prior. That was pretty understandable, though, because at the time, she hadn’t cut a particularly remarkable figure, whereas in this moment, Celes’s aura was so oppressive, it felt like we were being suffocated by it.

“Where is it, Shiro?” she asked.

“I’m sorry? I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I replied, deciding that feigning ignorance was the best course of action in this situation.

“I suggest you don’t play dumb with me,” she warned, looking even more intimidating than when she had first walked in.

I put on my best customer service smile. “I assure you, I’m not playing dumb. As you can see, we sell a whole range of items here. We’re always changing what we display on the shelves, and we add new product lines every single day. So unless you tell me exactly what it is you’re looking for, I’m afraid I can’t really help you.”

As you might have guessed, she wasn’t terribly pleased with this reply. “I’ve been told by the people at that ‘guild’—or whatever you call it—that you picked up the egg.”

“The egg?” I repeated.

“Yes. A large egg. It is quite cumbersome to carry.”

She took a step toward me, her gaze fixed on me like I was her prey. I wondered if I could maybe use the mention of the egg to my advantage somehow...

“Oh, *that* egg!” I exclaimed, and I clasped my hands together as if I’d suddenly just remembered it. My heart was pounding hard, but I tried not to let how nervous I was show on my face. “Yes, someone brought it to my store a few weeks back. I had no idea what kind of egg it was, but I still ended up buying it.”

I paused and tried to gauge Celes’s reaction, but she didn’t say a word.

“I don’t really know what it was about that egg, but the second I saw it, I knew I wanted it,” I continued. “Call it ‘merchant’s instinct,’ but I instantly knew it was really valuable. So I took it over to the guild to get it appraised.”

“You had it appraised? So that means you know what kind of egg it is?” she asked, her eyes narrowing to slits.

I nodded enthusiastically. “Yes! Like I said, I got it appraised at the guild.”

This time, her eyes grew wide and her aura became even more oppressive, but I couldn’t allow myself to succumb to the pressure it was exerting on me.

“I was so surprised when I learned the egg’s *true* nature!” I said, my smile unwavering.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Celes’s right hand move. Her fingers were tensed, almost as if she was preparing to deliver a blow with her razor-like digits. If I said the wrong thing here... Or more like, if I told the *truth* here, I was toast. There was absolutely no doubt in my mind about it. Still, I pretended I didn’t notice and carried on talking.

“I frankly couldn’t believe it when the guild’s appraiser told me it was an ebirasornis egg!” I said innocently.

Celes’s arm paused in its movement. *Phew*, I thought. I’d been afraid she would thrust out her hand and stab me, but thankfully, it seemed I was in the clear for the time being. I could tell Celes had relaxed upon hearing that, and I

felt the tension rushing out of my own body.

“What did you just say?” she asked, as if to make sure she’d heard me right.

“An ebirasornis? I’ve been told they’re these big birds that people ride around on instead of horses in certain regions. That’s what that egg is, right? The guild’s appraiser said so.”

Celes seemed deep in thought for a few seconds. “That’s right,” she said finally with a nod. “My comrades and I went through a great deal of trouble to get our hands on that egg, and I have to take it back to my homeland.”

She grabbed the leather pouch that was dangling from her hip and unceremoniously emptied its contents out onto the floor. “I’m not asking you to hand it over to me for free, naturally. You can take as many of these red magic crystals as you want in exchange for it,” she said.

“I see. So you’re telling me you’ll give me some of those crystals for the egg, hm? I’ve heard they’re quite valuable,” I muttered, pretending to ponder the offer. “All righty. It’s bartering time.”

“Bartering?” she queried.

She clearly had no idea what the word meant, so I tried explaining it to her. “It means we will discuss the matter of this egg until we reach an understanding. I am now aware of what it is you want, but I’d like to make sure we’re on the same page. I am a merchant, after all,” I said, trying to seem as cheerful as possible.

I’d managed to take charge of the conversation, so my next task was to smoothly transition to the second part of my plan.

“Well, if we’re going to start bartering...” I paused and spun around to address Emille, my sisters, and Aina behind me. “I’m going to have to ask all of you to leave for a bit.”

Emille immediately jumped at the chance to be anywhere but here. “Oh! I-I-I just remembered I still have some urgent work I’ve got to do! I’d better head back to the guild!” she declared in an unnaturally cheerful tone. “A-All right, then. I’m off, everyone!” She made a beeline for the door. “W-Well then, mister, I’m going back to work now! My condolences!”

“Hold on a minute, Emille!” I called out, stopping her just as she was about to open the door. “*My condolences*”? I thought. *Don’t just assume I’m going to die here, you rotten bunny.*

She turned around slowly, her face white as a sheet. “Wh-What is it, mister?” she asked in a strained voice. “I’m in a bit of a hurry.”

I wasn’t going to pass up this opportunity to get everyone out of here. “Could you take the others to the guild with you?” I asked Emille.

“The others? You mean Aina and your sisters?”

“Yes, and Suama too. They haven’t eaten breakfast yet, you see...” I said, making up an excuse on the fly. “So I was just wondering if you wouldn’t mind taking them over to the guild’s drinking hall. They can’t exactly go in there alone, because they’re too young, and anyway, it’d be too scary for them if they went there unaccompanied. So I’d feel a lot better if you could go with them,” I explained, winking repeatedly at Emille to make sure she got the message, which roughly translated to: *Get the girls out of here. Take them to the guild and make sure they’re safe. And if you can, bring backup.*

I didn’t say any of that, of course, nor did I allow my expression to betray my real intentions. All I did was wink. And would you believe it? Emille winked back. She had understood. It was probably the first time ever that Emille and I had been on the same wavelength.

“Of course, mister!” she chirped happily. “You know I can’t refuse you when you ask me for something. I’ll take them down to the drinking hall, no problem!”

“Thank you, Emille,” I said, then I turned to Aina. “Can you go with Miss Emille, Aina? Take Suama with you and go eat something yummy.”

“But Mister Shiro...” the little girl started to protest, but I was having none of it.

“I’m about to barter with this lady, Aina. I can’t let you hang around here while I’m doing that. It would be very unprofessional. So come on now. Go with Emille.”

The little girl nodded slowly. “Okay...”

“Come on, Aina! Hurry up and come over here!” Emille called, beckoning the little girl to her.

I turned to the twins next. “Shiori, Saori, you go with them too.”

“Bro, what are you...”

“Bro-bro...”

I could tell that the two of them were about to start arguing, so I quickly turned away from Celes so she couldn’t see what I was doing and brought a finger up to my lips to tell the pair to keep quiet.

“Get out of here. Now,” I said to them, switching to Japanese to make sure no one else in the room would understand.

Saori gawked at me, but Shiori instantly gave a firm nod. Despite her constant carefree attitude, she was actually pretty good at analyzing situations, and based on Celes’s standoffish behavior and my unusual reaction to her presence, she’d quickly understood that something was very wrong here. She picked up Suama and turned to the other two.

“Saorin, Aina, we shouldn’t get in the way of bro-bro’s work. Let’s go have some breakfast! Look, Suama, we get to go outside,” she said to the little dragon girl.

“Thank you, Shiori-chan, and sorry about this. I’ll come get you girls as soon as we’re all done here. Oh, and I’ll pay for your food too, so don’t worry about that, okay?” I said.

“Yay! Thanks, bro-bro!” Shiori chirped.

I figured the Blue Flash crew would probably be hanging around at the guild while we were having this conversation. Ney would be there for sure, and maybe even Eldos. It was a much safer place for the girls to be right at this moment.

“Hm, what should I eat?” Shiori mused aloud. “What do you wanna eat, Suama?”

“Shaw-shage!”

“What’s that? Sausage?”

“Shaw-shage!”

“Ooh, so you want sausages, do you? Okay, I’ll order some for you,” Shiori cooed at the little girl as she led her toward the door. But as they were passing Celes, all of a sudden...

“Awuh!”

Celes grabbed Suama by the collar and yanked her out of Shiori’s arms. The little dragon girl immediately started crying and thrashing about in Celes’s grip.

“Suama!” Shiori exclaimed.

“Hey, what the hell are you doing to Suama?!” Saori yelled.

The twins rushed toward Celes to try to get Suama back, but the older woman simply glared at them and said, “Be quiet.”

As soon as the words left her mouth, the twins dropped to their knees, totally overwhelmed by Celes’s murderous aura.

“Unh! Awuh!” came Suama’s garbled cries as she kicked her little legs back and forth, dangling several feet off the ground. But Celes’s grip didn’t loosen one bit.

Has she figured out Suama’s true identity? I thought, my blood running cold. My heart was pounding hard in my chest, and it was so loud, I wondered if everyone else could hear it too. But I couldn’t lose my composure. I had to stay calm.

“Celes, may I ask what you’re doing? Please let go of her,” I said to her as evenly as I could manage, pretending to be undaunted.

But she ignored my request. “You know what I am, don’t you?” she asked me coldly.

“I...” I started, but that was as far as I got.

Her eyes narrowed until they were no more than slits. I could see the anger writ large on her face. “Well, if you do, that should make things easier. Hand over the egg. Now. Unless you had no intention of giving the egg back to me in the first place.”

“Wh-What makes you say that? All I wanted to do was negotiate better terms and—” I started to explain, but she cut me off.

“You’re lying. I can tell by the look in your eye.”

I didn’t know what to say to that.

“You humes are weak, but you’re good at lying,” she stated, glaring at me. “Now, bring me the egg. If you do, I will let go of the child.”

She wanted me to give her the egg in exchange for Suama? Well, that wasn’t *exactly* possible. After all, there was no egg anymore. Suama was the dragon that had come out of the egg, so...

Hold on a minute. Doesn’t that kind of confirm that she doesn’t actually know Suama’s true identity? This gives us a serious advantage over her.

“Well? Do you not care what happens to this child?” she pressed me.

Surprisingly, Emille was the one who spoke up first. “Y-You do realize you’re declaring war on us by taking her hostage, right?! A-A-Are you sure you want to make the Fairy’s Blessing guild your enemy?!” she said, placing extra emphasis on the guild’s name.

And with good reason. The Fairy’s Blessing was the biggest Adventurers’ Guild in the kingdom, and even neighboring nations knew of its reputation. Most of the adventurers registered with the Fairy’s Blessing were seasoned professionals, and a lot of them were presently plying their trade here at the Ninoritch branch. Nobody in their right mind would ever want to get on the guild’s bad side. But Celes wasn’t just anybody. She was a demon.

“Do you really think a handful of insignificant pip-squeaks like you could do anything to me?” she retorted, not sounding threatened in the slightest. “Listen, Shiro,” she said, facing me again. “I have no intention of starting a war with the humes.”

“I kinda guessed that, yeah,” I said. “After all, I’m sure you would’ve used more drastic measures by now if you didn’t care about that sort of thing.”

“Precisely. Pretending to be a hume in order to look for this egg has been difficult to a painful degree. To be quite honest with you, I had half a mind to

just wipe out this town altogether.”

I gawked at her.

“But my objective isn’t to start a war with this nation of yours, nor is it to annihilate all of humekind. All I want...” She paused as if to hammer home the point. “All I want is to retrieve the egg and go home.”

“What do you plan to do with the egg?” I asked her.

“And why would I need to tell you that?”

“Well, you don’t, I guess,” I said with a shrug.

“Shiro. All you have to do is bring me the egg. If you do...” She paused and glanced at the dangling Suama. “I’ll let her go.”

Right. What should I do? It wasn’t like I could just come out and say that the little girl she was holding by the collar was in fact the dragon that had hatched out of the egg now, could I? She didn’t know the dragon could take the form of a hume. Again, this was my only advantage over her, and I had to make sure I didn’t lose it.

“Where is the egg, Shiro?” she asked again.

“I’m sorry, but it’s not here,” I replied. “You can search for it if you want, but I promise you, it’s not in the store right now.”

“Where is it, then?” she asked impatiently.

But I didn’t waver. I maintained a totally neutral expression and looked her straight in the eye. “I will only tell you that if you release Suama first.”

“I see,” she said with a nod. “Let me tell you something, Shiro. I *hate* it when people dillydally. The good thing is, there are other humes in this room, which means once I’ve killed this little one, I can just—”

“H-Hold on! Don’t!” I quickly jumped in.

“Then tell me where the egg is.”

“I...” I thought about how to answer for a few seconds, before settling on my reply. “I sold it. About two days ago,” I lied. It was my last resort.

“You sold it?”

“Yes. To a merchant friend of mine.”

But unfortunately, this wasn't enough to get rid of Celes.

“Go retrieve it, then,” she said plainly.

“Huh?”

“What is that thing you humes use? Money, is it? I've heard that, as long as you have some of that, you can basically get anything you want here. I'll give you three days. You had better have the egg ready for me on the evening of the third day, or else you know what will happen to this child.”

“Pa-pa!” the little dragon girl sobbed.

“Suama!” I cried. I gritted my teeth in frustration. Was there really nothing I could do to get Celes to let go of Suama?

But before I had time to think about my next move, Aina surprised everyone by yelling out, “Y-You can't do that!”

She was so scared, her knees were shaking, but she had a look of sheer determination on her face as she stared down Celes.

“You can't...” she pleaded. “You can't take little Su!”

“And you are?” Celes asked, cocking an eyebrow.

“I'm...” she said hesitantly. “I'm little Su's big sister! Please don't take her!” She paused, took a deep breath as if to steel her resolve for what she was about to do next, then went and stood in front of Celes. “Take me instead!”

“Aina! What are you *saying*?! Don't do that!” I cried, hurriedly trying to stop her.

She turned toward me. “Mister Shiro, little Su's crying. And I'm... I'm her big sister so I have to protect her. So...”

She trailed off and turned to face Celes again. It was clear from the look in her eye that she meant every word of it. There was no animosity in those eyes, nor anger. There was only a determination to protect Suama. To protect her little sister. And she was staring at Celes so intensely that it even made the demon flinch.

“You’re saying you want to take this child’s place? Is that right, little girl?” Celes asked her after a few seconds of silence.

The little girl nodded vigorously. “Yes. I’m her big sister, so I have to protect her,” she said resolutely.

“Her big sister, huh? Well, fine by me. I respect your determination, so I shall grant your request,” Celes said, before flinging Suama at me.

“Whoa!”

Thankfully, I managed to catch her before she hit the ground. The little dragon girl was still sobbing her eyes out, and I guessed she must have been dizzy after the way Celes had just tossed her at me, but at least she was safe. However...

“Aina!”

“Mister Shiro...”

Celes had now taken Aina hostage.

“Shiro, I’m borrowing this girl for a while. If you wish to see her again, bring me the egg,” she said.

“And wh-where exactly should I bring it?” I asked.

Celes thought about this for a moment. “We might get interrupted here. I shall be waiting for you in the forest.”

“In the forest? But *where*—” I started to argue, but Celes cut me off.

“I’ll send someone here. All you have to do is get the egg back and wait. Well, then. See you in three days’ time. I hope we will both be very satisfied with the results of this ‘bartering,’ or whatever it was you called it. Oh, and before I forget...”

She paused and waved a hand in the air. The store frontage was instantly blown away, including the door.

“If you don’t hold up your end of the bargain, you’re dead. Every single one of you.”

I heard a cracking sound as black wings sprouted from Celes’s back and

started flapping. She picked Aina up under one arm, and all I could do was watch as the demon took flight, going up and up and up into the sky.

“Wait! Aina! Aina!” I yelled after her.

“Mister Shiro!” I heard the little girl sob.

“I’ll come save you, Aina! I promise!”

“Mister Shiro! Protect little Su for me while I’m gone! Please! *Please!*”

I could barely make out her last “please” as Celes had already started flying off into the distance.

“*Aina!*”

This couldn’t be real...

Aina had just been abducted.

Chapter Twenty: Strategy Meeting

The atmosphere in the Fairy's Blessing guild was heavy.

"*What?! The little girlie got abducted?!*" Raiya cried out in shock.

A few hours had passed since Aina was kidnapped by Celes. Or rather, by the demons. The twins and Emille had all stood there, frozen in shock, but I hadn't wasted a second. The moment Aina was out of sight, I'd set off at a run toward the guild to get help from Raiya and my other adventurer friends, dragging the twins and Emille along with me. When I got there, I had explained the situation and also taken the opportunity to finally tell the twins about the demons. The pair had been treating their weekly trips to this other world basically like a vacation, so learning that there were dangerous beings such as demons here came as a huge shock to them. They were both presently staring at the floor and neither had said a word since.

"And by demons?! She got abducted by *demons?!!*" Raiya exclaimed, his jaw on the floor.

There were eleven of us in the room: the four members of Blue Flash, Ney, and Eldos, plus Shiori, Saori, and Emille, who had all been there when Aina was taken, and lastly, Suama and myself. Stella had also been here earlier on, but the news that her daughter had been abducted was such a shock, she had fainted, so she had been carried to Ney's room, where she was currently resting up.

I was overwhelmed with remorse. "I'm sorry. I was right there, and yet..." I trailed off.

"Don't apologize, man. You did nothing wrong. There's no way you would've been able to do anything against a demon. To be honest, *we* should be the ones apologizing here," Raiya said gravely.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well, we knew the demons were after the little dragon kiddo, so at least one

of us should've stuck to your side at all times. But we didn't. I'm so sorry, man," Raiya apologized, lowering his head.

The sight made Eldos snort dismissively. "Stop that. Yer soundin' like a real idiot."

"But Mr. Eldos, I was just—" Raiya started, attempting to explain himself, but Eldos immediately cut him off.

"I told ya to can it. Besides, if yer gonna say things like that, then me and Ney are to blame too. We didn't think of giving 'im a bodyguard either," Eldos muttered, balling up his hands in frustration.

Ney placed a hand on the dwarf's shoulder and treated him to a sympathetic look, as if trying to console him.

"We don't have time to argue about whose fault it is," Nesca interjected. "Right now, our main priority is to get Aina back."

Rolf nodded. "Miss Nesca is correct. We only have three days to devise a strategy to rescue her."

"I have an idea!" Kilpha piped up. "I'll sneak into wherever that demon lady's hiding and *hi-yah!* I'll kick her butt, meow!"

"Lemme stop you right there, Kilpha," Raiya jumped in. "This is a demon we're talking about here. You wouldn't be able to lay a finger on her. And besides, we don't know where she's hiding."

Kilpha humphed. "So what do *you* suggest, meow?" the cat-sith pouted.

"I dunno yet!" Raiya exclaimed, sounding exasperated. "That's what we're trying to figure out!"

"Well, think faster, meow! You *are* our leader, right?"

"Yes, I am. Stop rushing me!"

"Aina's life is in danger, meow! If we don't hurry, she might die, meow!"

"I told you to stop freakin' *rushing* me!"

The two of them had started raising their voices, but Ney quickly intervened before it descended into a full-on shouting match.

“Stop this quarreling at once. We’re all here to come up with a way to rescue Aina. If the two of you would rather fight like children, then you’re quite welcome to leave the room to do so.”

Neither of them said a word after that.

“Much better,” Ney said. “Now, might we get back to the topic at hand?”

“I’m sorry, Ney. Everyone’s on edge and it’s all my fault,” I said.

Raiya and Kilpha had gotten into an argument because of me, and that thought made me sad as well as incredibly frustrated at my own powerlessness. If only I’d managed to come up with a better plan, maybe Aina wouldn’t have...

“Please don’t say that, Shiro,” Ney interjected. “This is no one’s fault but those demons’. Though I have to say I am a little offended. I thought you’d gotten it into your head by now that you can always count on the Fairy’s Blessing guild. Seems I misjudged you.”

It took me a good few seconds to realize that this was Ney’s attempt at a joke.

“I’m really sorry,” I said one more time for good measure.

“Stop fretting, dude!” Raiya jumped in. “You know we’ve always got your back. So c’mon now. Let’s think up a way to save the girlie, yeah?”

“Raiya...” I breathed. “Yes, you’re right.”

On hearing Raiya’s words, I felt a warm sensation spreading through my chest. If Shiori and Saori hadn’t been there, I might even have started tearing up a little.

“Mr. Shiro, sir, the four of us will do what little we can to be of assistance,” Rolf said, smiling warmly at me.

“Even demons have weaknesses,” Nesca added. “So don’t give up.”

“You can always count on us, Shiro! And I’m sure Aina’s fine, meow!” Kilpha piped up.

“The demon gave ya three days, which means there ain’t no way she’s gonna do any harm to the kiddo before then,” Eldos pointed out.

“Their actions won’t go unpunished. We just need to keep our cool and devise

a strategy to defeat these demons,” Ney concluded.

And upon hearing these words, all of the adventurers in the room nodded, signifying that everyone was finally ready to start working together to rescue Aina.



“All right. Does anyone have any suggestions? All ideas are welcome,” Ney said as she surveyed our faces.

I raised my hand to ask about something that had been weighing on my mind for the past couple of days. “Um, I have a question, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course. What is it?” Ney asked, and everyone turned to look at me.

“Well, after what happened today, we can now safely say that it’s Suama—or at least, a *dragon*—that the demons are after,” I said.

“Yes, indeed,” Ney agreed with a nod.

“So, um, why didn’t the demons just try to ally with Suama’s mother, an adult dragon, instead?” I asked.

Nesca was the one who answered my question. “That’s simple. Demons are strong, but Suama’s mother is stronger. No dragon would agree to submit to anyone weaker than them. But there is one exception to that rule, and that is...”

“...if the dragon has been raised by that weaker person,” Ney said, taking over from Nesca. “It is said that if you teach a dragon to recognize you as its master while it is still young, the dragon will obey you even when it gets older.”

“I see. So basically like baby elephants,” I mused aloud.

““Baby elephants’? What do you mean?” Ney asked.

“Oh, nothing. It’s just an analogy people use where I’m from,” I said quickly.

The practice I’d been referring to was how, in circuses, elephant trainers would attach chains to the ankles of baby elephants and secure them to heavy stakes or posts. Since the elephants were still very young, they naturally didn’t have the strength to break free of their restraints, and as such, the baby

elephants would become conditioned to believe they couldn't escape their bonds. This mindset would then stay with them all the way into adulthood, meaning that even when they did eventually possess the strength to break free from their chains, they remained convinced they couldn't and wouldn't even try. Psychologists often referred to this as "learned helplessness" or "baby elephant syndrome." Judging from what Ney had said, this seemed to be what was happening to these dragons.

"So *that's* why they were after the dragon egg..." I muttered, glancing down at Suama in my lap. "Okay, next question: would Suama's mother be able to protect her?"

Ney nodded. "Yes, I'm sure of it. No demon is capable of defeating a dragon as powerful as the Immortal Dragon."

I mulled over my options. "The demons are demanding that I bring them the *egg*, not Suama herself..." I muttered, attempting to bring some order to my thought process. "Celes doesn't know the egg has hatched, nor that the dragon who came out of it is actually Suama."

There were things I could do, and many things I couldn't. But while *I* couldn't do them, it was possible my friends *could*...

"This is the one advantage we have over the demons. We have to make use of it somehow," I said resolutely.

"Sure, but how do ya plan on rescuing the kiddo?" Eldos asked me. "We still ain't got a clue where those damn demons are hidin' out."

"If we figure out where their hideout is, we can just charge in and beat 'em up, meow!" Kilpha piped up.

"Please try not to get overexcited, Miss Kilpha, ma'am," Rolf cautioned her gently. "We must first make sure that Miss Aina is safe before we start to plan any kind of attack."

"I *know* that, meow!" she pouted.

"You sure 'bout that?" Raiya teased her, before turning to me. "Hm? Hey, man. Is something wrong? You're awful quiet all of a sudden."

Aina and Suama. I needed to figure out a way of rescuing Aina without losing either of them in the process. *Think, Shiro, think. What does the lay of the land look like at present? What can I do? What can the others do?* I tried linking the answers to each of these questions together, and out of the blue, I got an idea.

“Shiori-chan,” I called out to my little sister.

Shiori—who hadn’t said a word in hours—raised her head and mumbled a little “Hm?”

“You’re in art club at school, right?” I asked her.

“Um, y-yeah...” she replied, clearly confused as to why I was asking her that.

“And you specialize in drawing and crafting stuff, right?”

“Yup. As it happens, I’m actually better at crafting than I am at drawing,” she said proudly.

“Noted. In that case...” I paused, took out my cell phone, and pulled up a photo that I showed to her. “Could you make a replica of this?”

The picture was of me struggling to carry a giant egg and the twins beaming triumphantly at the camera. Yup, that’s right. It was the photo we’d taken the day we found the egg in the forest.

“The egg? Wait, bro-bro, is your plan to...”

“Yes, yes, it is. Your big brother’s about to take the biggest gamble of his life. So what do you think, Shiori-chan? Think you can do it?” I asked.

She hesitated a little before finally nodding. “Yup, I can do it! Leave it to me, bro-bro! It’ll look so like the real thing, you won’t be able to tell the difference!”

“Great. Thanks, Shiori-chan.” I grabbed my wallet, fished out all the bills in it, and handed them to her. “Here, take this. Let me know if you need any more,” I said to her.

“That’s more than enough,” she told me.

“Good. Can you get started on it right away? We don’t have much time.”

“Roger!” She brought her hand up to her forehead in something approximating a salute. “I’ll be off, then!” She turned to her sister before going.

“Saorin, make sure you pay attention to the rest of the conversation, okay? I wanna know everything!”

And with that, she left the room, probably making a beeline for the shop so she could open the portal back to grandma’s house without drawing attention to herself.

“Bro, you’re asking Shiorin to make you a fake version of the egg? But what if that demon lady figures out it’s not the real deal?” Saori asked me.

“Don’t worry. I’ve thought of that. I’ll explain it to you in a bit, but first...” I looked around the room and saw that all eyes were on me. “I’ve come up with a plan to save Aina without needing to hand over Suama,” I announced to everyone. “May I?”

“Of course,” Ney said with a nod.

“Go right ahead,” Raiya said. “After all, it’s not like we’ve got any other ideas.”

“Okay. So I actually have *two* ideas,” I told them. “And which one I end up going with all depends on whether or not boss manages to find out where the Immortal Dragon resides. Either way, I’ll need Shiori to make a replica of the egg for me. And then...”

Patty had gone to the fairies’ dwelling to ask her grandfather—the clan leader—about the Immortal Dragon’s whereabouts, and she hadn’t returned yet. My plan differed slightly depending on whether or not she managed to come back with that information. I outlined both possible strategies to my comrades, and for the sake of clarity, I labeled them Plan A (we know the Immortal Dragon’s location) and Plan B (we don’t). As I went on, I could see my comrades looking more and more surprised by what I was suggesting.

“So yeah, that’s the gist of it. That’s what I’ve come up with. Could you please all help me put this plan into action?” I said, bowing my head to my adventurer friends.

Saori, who was sitting next to me, shot up from her seat and bowed too. “I’m begging for your help too! Please lend your strength to my brother!”

“What do you think, Nesca?” Raiya asked his girlfriend.

“If what Shiro said is actually possible, this plan has a high chance of succeeding. I’m in,” she declared.

“Then you can count me in too,” Raiya said.

Kilpha and Rolf were the next to speak.

“I’m in too, meow!”

“I also believe Mr. Shiro’s strategy is worth a try.”

“Ya youngsters sure are easy to convince, ain’t ya?” Eldos snickered, then he turned to Ney. “What ’bout you, girlie? What ya gonna do?”

“What are *you* going to do, Eldos?” Ney retorted, firing his question straight back at him.

“Me? I’m on board. Shiro’s little scheme sounds like it’ll be heaps of fun,” he said, smirking.

“Does it now? Well, in that case...” Ney paused as she stood up. “It seems that everyone here is in agreement and we will proceed with the plan you outlined, Shiro.” She smiled, then shifted her gaze to the rest of the group. “I hereby use my authority as guildmaster to order an emergency mobilization of all adventurers ranked silver and above. All nonurgent quests shall be suspended until further notice. Henceforth, the demon-repelling operation shall be our number one priority. Emille!”

“Y-Yes?”

“Please deal with all the formalities.”

“Gotcha, Miss Guildmaster!” the bunny girl said with a firm nod.

Ney turned to me next. “Shiro.”

“Yes?”

“I promise we will rescue Aina, no matter what it takes,” she declared, her voice unwavering.

“That goes without saying,” I replied. “I’m ready to do whatever it takes to get her back, even if it costs me my life.”

The plan I’d come up with had received unanimous backing from my

comrades, and Operation Save Aina was finally underway. We only had three days to get everything in order, and the next day, Patty came back from the forest with the fairies' clan leader in tow.

Intermission

“Eat.”

That was all Celesdia said before throwing *something* in Aina’s direction, which landed at the feet of the little girl sitting on the ground with a dull thud. Aina peered down and couldn’t help squeaking a startled yelp when she saw that the thing thrown toward her was in fact a wolf’s hind leg. The little girl stared at Celesdia, her gaze a mixture of shock and confusion.

“Eat,” the demon repeated.

Aina took another look at the leg. The blood hadn’t been drained out of it, and it was still covered in fur. It also looked like the leg hadn’t been cut, but rather, forcefully ripped away. The hunched-up little girl hid her face with her knees.

“Don’t wanna,” she mumbled.

“It is still two days until Shiro will be here. Humes are weak—especially the children—and you refused food yesterday. If you do not eat, you will starve to death,” Celesdia said matter-of-factly.

She walked over to Aina and picked up the wolf’s leg.

“Eat. I need you alive for the time being. Come on now.”

She grabbed Aina forcefully by the jaw and brought the bloody leg up to the little girl’s face. The demon’s grip was so strong, Aina couldn’t break free from it, no matter how hard she tried.

“I-It’s not good to eat meat raw!” the little girl yelled.

She hadn’t meant to say it so loudly and the volume of her voice surprised even her. Celesdia had been in the process of moving the leg toward the little girl’s mouth, but upon hearing this objection, she paused, the hunk of meat hovering just in front of Aina’s lips.

“Is that so?” she said, her expression as impassive as always. There did seem

to be a hint of curiosity to her tone, though.

“Y-Yeah. If you eat meat raw, you get an upset stomach,” the little girl explained.

“An ‘upset’ stomach? I didn’t know a hume’s organs could have *feelings*,” Celesdia said with a frown. It didn’t seem like she was joking.

The little girl quickly shook her head. “N-No, not *that* kind of upset. It means, um, your stomach hurts, and sometimes, you puke.”

“Oh, I see. Abdominal pain and nausea, huh? Humes really are fragile creatures. You can’t even eat meat,” Celesdia commiserated, shooting a look of pity at Aina.

The little girl couldn’t help feeling the demon was mocking her. And not just her, but everyone who was dear to Aina as well. That didn’t sit right with her.

“Of course we can eat meat,” she retorted tetchily. “We just cook it first.”

“You cook it?” Celesdia said.

“Yeah. It makes it tastier!”

The little girl leaped to her feet and took a deep breath, as if readying herself for what she was about to do.

“Wait there a minute,” she said to Celesdia, and she went to pick up some kindling from the forest floor nearby. When she thought she had enough, she took a box of matches out of her backpack and got a little campfire going. She then used a knife to carve some twigs into skewers, removed the fur from the wolf’s leg, cut the meat up into small chunks, which she proceeded to thread onto the skewers, and finally, held the skewers over the fire to start cooking the meat.

“What are you doing?” Celesdia asked her.

“Hm? I’m cooking!”

“Cooking?” the demon repeated, her eyebrows knitted together in confusion.

“Yeah. Don’t people cook where you’re from?” the little girl queried.

“I don’t think so. At least, my tribe doesn’t.”

“How do you eat, then?”

“We kill monsters and eat them. Simple as that.”

“Raw?”

“Yes.”

Aina’s jaw gaped open upon hearing Celesdia’s response.

The night before, Celesdia had taken Aina into the forest, and the little girl had been so scared, she’d cried and cried and cried. When she’d finally managed to calm herself down again, a thought flitted through her mind: *Is Celesdia going to kill me?* That thought broke the fragile dam she’d just built up and she went straight back to crying her eyes out again. But she didn’t regret what she had done. She had protected her little sister. It didn’t matter that Suama wasn’t actually related to her. What mattered was that Aina had done her job as a big sister. She knew she had done the right thing, even if that one decision would wind up getting her killed. Aina was ready to accept her fate.

But Celesdia didn’t kill her. In fact, she didn’t do anything to her. All she did was stare at the little girl as she bawled her eyes out. She didn’t attempt to comfort her—though Aina hadn’t really been expecting her to—but she didn’t belittle her either. She simply stared at her in silence. At some point, Aina had tired herself out from crying so much and ended up drifting off to sleep. When she awoke, Celesdia was still looking at her. Though when Aina took a proper look at her surroundings, she noticed that strewn all about the two of them were monster corpses, which hadn’t been there the night before. It was only later that evening that Aina realized Celesdia had spent the whole night guarding her.

Despite crying about her wretched circumstances so much the night before, she now found herself casually roasting meat over a fire in front of Celesdia. It was such a weird turn of events that the little girl couldn’t help a muffled giggle escaping her lips.

“Done,” she announced as she moved the skewers away from the fire. She reached into her little backpack, took out a small shaker full of salt, and sprinkled some of it onto the meat. When she was done, she handed one of the skewers to Celesdia.

“What are you doing?” the demon asked, eyeing the food suspiciously.

“I’m giving you some of the meat I cooked. It’s good. You should try it!” the little girl chirped, pushing the skewer closer to Celesdia’s face and basically copying what the demon had done to her with the raw wolf leg. The little girl thought it was kind of funny that their roles had pretty much reversed, and she was having a hard time stopping herself from giggling again.

“Here, this is for you,” she reiterated. “Eat!”

Celesdia sighed at length and reluctantly grabbed the skewer from the little girl before taking a bite of the cooked wolf meat.

“It’s good,” was the demon’s response.

This was the first time Aina had seen Celesdia’s expression change. The demon stared at the skewer for a couple of seconds, her eyes wide as saucers, then she absolutely devoured the meat in record time. Chuckling away to herself, Aina took a bite of her own skewer.

“So that was ‘cooking,’ yes?” Celesdia asked when they were both done with their meals.

“Yup! Are you surprised?” Aina said.

“Very. I had no idea humes ate meat this way.”

“There are lots of other ways of cooking meat too! Like boiling, and steaming, for example,” Aina explained. She had unconsciously started to lower her guard around Celesdia—only a little bit—and she wasn’t as wary around the demon as she had been before. “Hey, miss...” she said without thinking.

“What is it?”

“Um...”

For a short while, the little girl simply stared at the demon, her mouth opening and closing repeatedly without any sound coming out, for she knew she had to pick her next words carefully.

“Why do you want the egg that Mister Shiro found?” she asked slowly, as if weighing up each word as they passed her lips.

A pained expression appeared on Celesdia's face. "You said you were that little girl's sister, didn't you? When you asked me to take you instead of her."

Aina nodded. "Y-Yeah."

There was a wistful, almost sorrowful look in Celesdia's eyes as she uttered her next words. "I have a little sister too."

Chapter Twenty-One: The Day of the Deal

Three days had passed, and it was almost time for my arranged meeting with Celesdia. Night had fallen long before and thick clouds covered the sky.

“Grandma, can you hear me?”

Meow?

“Grandma, I need your help. Please answer if you can hear me.”

Mrreow!

“It’s no use,” I sighed. “She can’t hear me.”

I’d been trying to get in contact with grandma through Peace every day since Aina was abducted, but to no avail. It seemed her connection to Peace was still out of action.

“Guess I really have to do this all by myself,” I said with a resigned air.

I breathed a little “All righty!” to pump myself up. *I’m ready*, I told myself. *I will save Aina*.

“That messenger sure is taking their sweet time, though, huh?”

It was already quite late, and I was starting to feel a bit on the sleepy side. I was slightly afraid I might fall asleep if this demon messenger didn’t show up soon. But just as this thought crossed my mind, Peace suddenly sat up, presumably because he had felt the presence of someone—or *something*—on the other side of the door.

Meow.

“I wonder if that’s my escort...” I mused aloud.

Meow!

Peace hopped onto my shoulder and I got up from my seat. I walked over to the counter, put on my rucksack, and stepped outside, though the second we crossed the threshold, the little kitten started hissing. I turned my head in the

direction that was drawing his attention and saw some sort of weird, human-shaped black mist. It looked just like the kind of ghost you'd see in a horror movie. If I hadn't known this was Celes's messenger, I would've bolted in the opposite direction, screaming for dear life, no doubt about it.

"A-Are you Celes's messenger?" I said to the black mist.

It was flickering, just like a ghost. The black mist drifted toward me and peered at my face in silence for several seconds. It was *terrifying*.

"The...egg..." it rasped. "The...egg..."

"I have it."

I opened my rucksack and gestured at the mist to take a look inside. Once it saw the egg (or well, the fake egg), the mist turned and started floating back toward the forest.

"Follow...me..." it said, stopping and glancing at me. "Follow...me..." Its voice sounded almost like static and I really had to focus to understand what it was saying.

"All right," I said, nodding for extra confirmation that I would do what it asked. "Please take me to Celes."

The black mist resumed floating toward the forest, though every so often, it stopped and glanced back in my direction before gliding on its way once more. I had no idea what the hell this thing was, but it seemed it was my guide for this evening.



It wasn't long before we had gone beyond the town limits of sleepy Ninoritch and were entering the forest. It was really dark out here, so I produced a flashlight from my rucksack and switched it on. We walked for a long, long, *long* time. I never imagined Celes would make me walk for *three hours* just to meet up with her.

"Hey, a-are we there yet?" I asked my amorphous guide. My body was starting to reach its limit.

The mist didn't answer, though I hadn't really expected it to. But what I

definitely hadn't been expecting was for it to basically melt right in front of my eyes and dissolve into the ground.

"Hey, come back! You still need to—"

I was about to finish that sentence by adding "take me to Celes," but I was interrupted by a little voice calling out my name from somewhere behind me.

"Mister Shiro!"

I immediately spun around. Aina was standing there, and Celes was holding her by the arm.

"Aina! I'm so glad you're okay. I'm..." I choked up slightly. "I'm so glad."

My vision started going blurry. *Stop it, Shiro. Don't start crying now, I admonished myself. You can't let your guard down.*

"Mister Shiro..." the little girl repeated.

"Are you all right, Aina? Are you hurt at all?" I asked.

"N-No, I'm okay."

"That's good. Everything's fine now, Aina. We're going home together, okay?"

I flashed her a reassuring smile before shifting my gaze to Celes. She was staring me down, though as always, there wasn't even a hint of emotion in her ruby-red eyes. Peace snarled at her, every last one of his hairs standing on end. It seemed the little kitten instinctively knew Celes was bad news.

"I see you came alone. A wise move. I imagine it must have been quite nerve-racking for a hume to come out here. I suppose you deserve some praise for that," the demon said.

"Well, gosh, thanks. It's such an honor having the mighty Celes complimenting li'l ol' me," I answered sarcastically.

"I admire your guts," she said, then she gestured to Aina. "As you can see, I have not harmed the girl. I have held up my end of the bargain, so now it is time for you to hold up yours. Take out the egg."

All right, it's go time. I audibly swallowed my saliva. From here on out, I couldn't make even the slightest mistake. I had to be careful about every single

word out of my mouth, every minor change in my expression, and every single movement, as tiny as it might be.

“Understood.”

I set the giant rucksack I’d been carrying on my back down on the ground and opened it. Then I *very* carefully took out the egg.

The instant Celes caught a glimpse of the egg, she gasped. “That’s it! Hurry up and give it to me!” she urged, her eyes firmly fixed on the egg.

Or should I say, the *fake* egg. Shiori had spent two days straight making this replica, without even taking a break to sleep, and it looked just like the real thing. Of course, the fact we were in the forest in the middle of the night helped too, as the lack of light meant Celes wouldn’t be able to spot any minor imperfections or anything that was slightly off. And judging by her reaction, it seemed we had successfully tricked her.

“I-I will. But you need to let go of Aina first,” I said.

“Fine,” Celes replied. “Now that I have the egg, I have no more use for the girl.” She released her grip on the little girl’s arm and glanced down at her. “Go,” she told her impassively.

“But miss...” Aina mumbled, not moving an inch.

“I told you to go. Don’t you want to go to Shiro?”

“I-I do, but...”

“Then *go*. Before I change my mind,” Celes said, and she pushed the little girl forward. Aina staggered from the force of the shove, taking several steps forward before she managed to regain her balance.

“Mister Shiro!” she cried out as she dashed toward me and jumped into my arms.

“Aina!” I exclaimed, hugging her to my chest. I squeezed her tight. Tighter than I ever had before.

“Mister Shiro! Mister Shiro! Mister Shiro!” the little girl bawled, unable to stop herself from repeating my name, likely due to her relief at finally being set free. Tears were streaming down her face and her little body was heaving with

sobs as she clung onto me for dear life.

“That must’ve been a very scary experience for you, huh? I’m so, so sorry, Aina. But everything’s all right now. You’re safe,” I reassured her.

She nodded. “Yeah. I’m safe.”

“You’re the strongest little girl I’ve ever known,” I said to her, gently patting her head. I looked up again and met Celes’s gaze. “You can come and get the egg now.”

I slowly backed away with Aina still in my arms, only stopping once I was about five meters away from the egg—at which point, Celes started moving toward it. It was true that the replica Shiori had made *looked* just like the real thing, but...

“What?!”

Celes went to pick up the egg, but the second her hands touched it, she instantly recoiled like she’d been burned. She glared at me, her face contorted with fury.

“You *tricked* me! This is a fake!”

Busted. The replica Shiori had spent forty-eight hours making might have looked the part, but in the end, there was no escaping that it was made out of papier-mâché. As soon as Celes had gone to pick it up, she’d known it was fake.

Celes let out a bloodcurdling cry of pure rage. Cracking sounds echoed around the silence of the forest as her arms started to swell into two giant, black limbs with sharp claws at the end. The rest of her body remained the same as before, though. Only her arms had transformed.

“You broke your promise! Don’t think you can get away with this!” she snarled at me as she brought her foot down on the replica egg and crushed it to pieces. She raised one of her demonic arms into the air, but just as she was about to swing it toward us, a tiny silhouette flew out of my rucksack.

“Y-You’re the one who won’t get away with what you’ve done!”

“Patty!” Aina exclaimed.

Yup, that’s right. That small silhouette was Patty. She was so tiny, she’d easily

managed to hide away in my bag, making it look like I'd come here alone.

"Aina! Don't worry. I'm here now, so everything's gonna be fine," the little fairy declared, and she flashed a reassuring smile at the little girl before shifting her attention back to Celes. "H-Hey, you! How *dare* you abduct Aina!" she spat, glaring at the demon.

"A fairy?" Celes said, dumbfounded. "Why would a fairy be protecting humes?"

"Because these two are my underlings, that's why!"

"What? I don't understand." Celes paused, her eyes narrowing. "But what I *do* understand is, if you're on their side, that makes you my enemy, so if you get in my way, I will have no choice but to crush you."

"H-Hmph! As if! You're the one who's going down tonight!" the little fairy scoffed, then pointed a tiny finger at Celes. "Aaand *boom!*"

A bolt of lightning instantly shot down from the sky. Yup, all Patty needed to do was utter just one word while pointing at Celes for a thunderbolt to strike the demon and light up the night sky for a brief instant.

Celes groaned in pain as she dropped to her knees. "You cast that spell without even chanting a full incantation?!"

Patty's surprise attack had been a success, but we weren't done yet.

"*Kaboom!*" was the word that accompanied the fairy's next spell.

A massive explosion erupted around Celes and she cried out in agony as she was sent crashing through several trees by Patty's attack. This meant we'd put a little more distance between us and the demon. Everything was going exactly according to plan. We could proceed onto the next phase.

"Shiro, now!" Patty shouted at almost exactly the same time that Peace let out a loud meow from his spot on my shoulder. The little fairy then grabbed onto the back of my head.

"Right, boss!"

I held out my hand and the portal to my world appeared behind us. With one hand, I grabbed hold of the door handle, while my other hand tightened its grip

on Aina.

“Let’s go, Aina,” I said.

“Huh? What?” the little girl said, clearly not understanding what was going on.

With the little girl secure in my arms, and Patty and Peace standing on my head and my shoulder respectively, I pushed open the closet door and leaped through the portal.

“Well, you know how the saying goes, right? ‘He who fights and runs away, lives to fight another day!’”

Chapter Twenty-Two: The Great Escape Plan

“Phew, that was scary. Definitely shaved a few years off my life!” I breathed a sigh of relief with Peace perched on my right shoulder, Patty clutching the back of my head, and Aina cradled to my chest. We had successfully escaped.

“Mister Shiro, where...” a little voice said quietly. “Where are we? We were in the forest just a few seconds ago...”

The confused little girl glanced around the room containing grandma’s memorial altar as I set her down on the tatami mats. Yup, that’s right. In order to make our escape and save Aina’s life, I had been forced to use my ultimate trump card: my ability to travel between worlds.

“This is my grandma’s house,” I told her.

Her eyes grew wide and her jaw dropped. She took a proper look around the room this time, her gaze starting up at the ceiling, then dropping to the tatami floor, then moving to the curtained window, then to the photo of grandma throwing double peace signs, before finally settling on my face.

“Your grandma? What? We’re in...” she said hesitantly. “We’re in that nice witch lady’s house?”

“Yup. Though I guess it’s technically *my* house now,” I said. While grandma *was* still alive and well, she was officially listed as “deceased” in the Amata family register, and the house was in my name.

“Mister Shiro, does that mean this is—” Aina started but was interrupted by Patty.

“Your *grandma’s* house?! H-Hold on, Shiro! Does that mean we’re in the land of the witches?! We are, aren’t we?!”

Oh, right. While I *had* told Patty about this part of my plan, I’d neglected to mention where the portal actually came out. A couple of months back, the two of them had accidentally seen me “logging into” Ruffaltio, and they were convinced I’d just returned from the so-called “land of the witches,” so I went

along with it. Ever since, the two of them had been very curious about this mysterious place.

“Well? Answer me, Shiro!” Patty pressed me. “Th-That’s an order from your boss! And you know you can’t go against your boss’s orders—”

I raised my hand to interrupt her. “Calm down, boss. We might have saved Aina, but the mission is far from over. Remember?”

Patty clenched her teeth in frustration. “I-I know.”

“We still need to proceed with the next phase of the plan. Let’s save the chitchat for later, yeah?”

“I *know*!” she said impatiently. “We have to—what was the word again? ‘Prioritize’? Yeah, we have to prioritize the mission!”

“That’s my boss,” I praised her. “I knew you’d get it.”

I glanced up at the clock on the wall, which told me it was twenty-two minutes past two in the morning. They would definitely have seen Patty’s lightning bolt, so I was sure they wouldn’t be too much longer.

“Bro-bro, are you alive?”

“You okay, bro?”

Just as the thought crossed my mind, the closet door slid open again, and Shiori and Saori stepped through into the room.

“Huh? What’s going on?” Aina asked, gawking at me again.

Patty did know about this part of the plan, but even she seemed shocked to see the pair walking out of the closet.

Meow.

Peace, on the other hand, seemed as unbothered as always.



“I’m so glad you’re all okay!” Shiori wailed. The second she had laid eyes on Aina, she had rushed forward and wrapped her arms around the little girl. “Especially you, Aina! I’m so relieved you’re all right!” she said, rubbing her cheek against the little girl’s with tears streaming down her face. “Did that evil

demon lady do anything to you? Have you been eating properly?" She pulled away from the little girl and gave her a serious look.

"I-I have," the little girl replied. "And Miss Celes didn't do anything bad to me."

"Good!" Shiori said with a firm nod, before pulling Aina into another big hug and smooshing their cheeks together again. Aina looked incredibly uncomfortable, but she let Shiori do what she liked.

"I'm surprised you of all people managed to pull this off. Good job, bro!" Saori said, giving me a hard slap on my back.

"Ow!" I yelped, the sharp pain bringing tears to my eyes.

I spun around to give Saori a piece of my mind, but found that she was on the verge of tears herself. That didn't really surprise me. Despite her stubborn, "tough girl" attitude, her love for her friends and family was exceptionally strong, and she probably wouldn't have been able to stop tears from welling up in her eyes on seeing that Aina was alive and well.

"Thanks, Saori. Boss is the one you should be praising, though. We definitely wouldn't have made it out of there without her," I said to my sister before turning to the little fairy and adding, "Thanks, boss."

"I-I know, right?" she boasted. "If I hadn't been there, that demon would've killed you!"

"Yup, she probably would have," I admitted.

"B-But you're the one who came up with the plan," she added quickly. "S-So if you weren't here, we wouldn't have been able to save Aina either. You did good, Shiro. Your boss is proud of you!" she said, her face going as red as a tomato.

Aw, looks like someone's feeling a little shy, huh?

"We all played important roles in tonight's mission," I concluded diplomatically. "Anyway, Saori, is everything ready?"

My sister gave me a thumbs up. "Yup!"

"All righty, then." I turned to Aina and said her name to get her attention.

Finally free of Shiori's embrace, she looked at me and made a quizzical sound. "Listen," I said to her. "I'm going back into the forest to take Suama to her real mother."

"To her mama?" the little girl asked, blinking a few times in surprise.

"Yes," I confirmed. "What do you want to do? I know you're probably really tired, so you can rest up here while we're out, okay?"

Aina had spent three whole days in the forest, and it showed. She was pale and had dark circles under her eyes. The poor little mite looked absolutely exhausted. But even so, she didn't hesitate for a single second before giving her answer.

"I wanna come with you!" she said, her eyes burning with determination. "Mister Shiro, take me with you! Please!"

"I should've expected that. You *are* Suama's big sister, after all, aren't you?" I said softly.

"Yeah!" she said, nodding and puffing her little chest out with pride in the same way Patty always did.

I hummed. "All righty, then. Let's get going." I glanced at my sisters and saw that they were looking at me. "Shiori, Saori, I'm counting on you," I told them.

"Aye, aye, sir! Let's go," Shiori chirped.

"You coming, then, bro?" Saori said, almost impatiently.

The two of them placed their hands on the closet door and slid it open.



We walked through the portal and found ourselves back in the forest again.

"Pa-pa! Ain-ya!"

Suama was there, waiting for us.

"Huh? What? Little Su?" Aina said, puzzled.

"Ain-ya!" the baby dragon squealed as she wrapped her arms around the bigger girl, who immediately squeezed her back. It was a rather touching scene.

“Little Su! Little Su!” Aina kept repeating as tears of happiness welled up in her eyes.



For a little while, I didn't budge from where I was standing, instead simply gazing at the pair of them with a slight smile on my face.

"You sure took your sweet time, man!" a voice called over, pulling me out of my reverie. The voice belonged to Raiya, and he wasn't alone.

"So it *is* true. You and your sisters really *can* use teleportation magic," Ney marveled.

"You truly are full of surprises, Mr. Shiro, sir," Rolf commented.

"Forgotten magic..." Nesca breathed. "Shiro, can you teach that to me?"

"I wanna learn how to do that too, meow!" Kilpha piped up.

A whole bunch of adventurers were also standing around, awaiting orders.

"Uh, could we leave that for another day, maybe?" I said to Nesca and Kilpha, before turning my attention to a tiny old man—a fairy just like Patty—who was hovering a few meters away from the crowd. I walked over to him and said, "Mr. Clan Leader, thank you so much for helping us tonight. Please could you take us to the Immortal Dragon now?"

Yup, that old man was the leader of the fairies, and one of the very few people in the world who knew where the Immortal Dragon resided.



I guess this is probably as good a time as any for me to tell you all about my Great Escape Plan. During that confab with Ney, Eldos, and the Blue Flash crew a few days before I went to meet Celesdia in the forest, I revealed my biggest secret: that no matter where I was in the world of Ruffaltio, I (plus Shiori and Saori, for that matter) could travel instantly to grandma's house. "I haven't told anyone about this yet, but I can teleport to the Immortal Witch's house at will," were my exact words at the time. Though I left out the part about grandma's house being in another world, because I didn't really want to open that particular can of worms just at the moment. All I'd told them was that I possessed a skill that allowed me to go to grandma's house whenever I wanted. The group didn't seem entirely convinced at first, because while all of them knew I was the Immortal Witch's grandson, I was still making one hell of a wild

statement. Of course, I'd anticipated this reaction, so I gave them a quick demonstration then and there, and that was enough to make them believe me. It was at that point that Patty returned with the fairies' clan leader, who had agreed to take us to the Immortal Dragon. I thought long and hard about how I could use this as well as my ability to travel between worlds to save Aina, and my Great Escape Plan was hatched.

The first step was for Ney, the Blue Flash crew, and a bunch of high-ranked adventurers to make their way into the forest, with Saori and little Suama in tow. Their mission was to follow Patty's grandfather to the Immortal Dragon's lair, which would take about four days on foot, while Shiori stayed behind at grandma's house and put her talent for arts and crafts to good use making a replica of the egg. Once she was done with it, Saori would come get her through the portal and the pair of them would "teleport" back to the forest. Meanwhile, I would stay in Ninoritch with my secret weapon: Patty. The demons were most likely keeping a watchful eye on me, so going back home myself wasn't an option.

Fortunately, this first phase of the plan had been a success. We'd managed to rescue Aina from Celes's clutches and subsequently followed the twins through the portal back into the forest. All in all, it was a pretty ingenious strategy, if I may say so myself. We had completely outwitted the demons. All that was left to do now was to get Suama back to her mother, and it was mission accomplished.

Oh, one last thing to add: Eldos wasn't with us in the forest. We had asked him to stay in Ninoritch and keep guard with the rest of the guild's adventurers. There were two reasons for this: first, we were a little worried the demons would go berserk and attack the town in an attempt to retrieve the egg, so we thought it best to have someone reliable holding down the fort; and the second reason was... Well, to put it bluntly, Eldos wasn't exactly the best fit for this particular mission. Dwarves tended to be rather short and stout, and Eldos with his bulging muscles was no exception. But the most vital element of this mission was how quickly we could cover the ground, and unfortunately, due to his stature, speed wasn't exactly one of Eldos's strengths. So when he offered to accompany us into the forest, I'd had to persuade him that he would prove

much more useful staying in town, making sure the townsfolk were safe. It had taken me a little while to convince him, but I'd eventually managed it.

"Bro! The fairy clan leader said it should take us one more day to get to the home of Suama's mama!" Saori informed me.

"That soon? You guys sure walk fast," I said, rather impressed.

They'd only left town a little under two and a half days before, yet they were already this close to the lair of Suama's mother? They definitely must have sacrificed quite a bit of sleep in their efforts to get to their destination faster. A quick glance at Saori's face and the huge dark purple circles under her eyes confirmed my theory. But despite how exhausted she must have been, she was still smiling.

"We're leaving first thing in the morning, bro! You'd better be ready for some walking, 'cause it's gonna be one hell of a trek!"

I knew she was putting on a brave face for me and Suama—for her family—and that thought made me incredibly happy.

Chapter Twenty-Three: The Pursuer

"Is everyone ready? We're leaving in a couple of minutes," Ney announced. The sun hadn't even risen yet.

"I haven't slept a wink," I muttered to myself as I slowly sat up.

My confrontation with Celes and the excitement of having successfully saved Aina the night before (or well, more like earlier that same day) were still too fresh in my mind to allow me to sleep, and before I knew it, it was morning.

"If you get too tired, you can go rest at grandma's house, okay, bro? I'll come pick you up later on," Saori suggested.

She couldn't have slept more than a couple of hours either, but she was surprisingly full of energy. Well, she *was* the star of her school's track-and-field team, after all. Or maybe it was just a perk of being young. Either way, I really wished she could have shared some of that energy with me.

"Don't be silly," I replied. "I'm the one who came up with this plan, so I have a duty to see it through to the end."

"Well, if you say so," she said with a shrug. "Just don't go passing out on me. That'd be so uncool and totally embarrassing for me."

"I swear on my dignity as your big brother that I will remain standing upright until the bitter end," I answered playfully.

"Good," Saori said. "Then I'll do my best too!"

"Noted." I smiled. "Think you could wake up your sister, then?" I said, glancing down at Shiori who was snoring away softly at her twin's feet. Shiori definitely wasn't a morning person and this would probably be the first time in her life that she would be up before sunrise.

"Sure thing," Shiori replied. "You can go wake up Suama and Aina, then."

"Okay," I said with a nod before turning to the little girls, who were still fast asleep beside me. Aina had her arms wrapped around Suama.

“Aina, wake up,” I said softly.

The little girl mumbled something sleepily and her eyes slowly blinked open. She brought a hand up to her face and rubbed the sleep out of her eyes before gingerly attempting to sit up. I then gently shook Suama awake.

“Pa-pa?” she mumbled. She wasn’t awake for long, though, because as soon as I’d picked her up and put her on my back, she was straight back to sleep again, her breathing soft and steady.

Shiori mumbled sleepily, then said, “Morning, bro-bro,” before letting out a big yawn. Her eyes seemed a little bleary, but she didn’t really look all that tired. Just like her sister, she had only slept for a couple of hours, but she seemed as fresh as if she’d had a full night’s sleep. Teenagers truly were terrifying creatures.

“Morning, Shiori-chan. I know you’ve only just woken up, but we’re setting out again soon,” I said to her with a gentle smile, before shifting my attention to Ney. The twins followed my gaze.

Ney was looking around our makeshift encampment and assessing the situation. All of the adventurers had already packed up their belongings and were standing awaiting orders. Once Ney was completely sure that everyone was up and ready to move, she took a deep breath and announced, “Okay, everyone, off we go!”



Saori had informed me it was going to be “one hell of a trek,” but it was way worse than I’d anticipated. Patty had perched herself on my head, as she often did, and while it usually didn’t bother me at all since the fairy weighed basically nothing, that extra poundage coupled with the weight of Suama on my back and the punishing pace we were walking at were really starting to take a toll on my body. Peace was walking beside us, having voluntarily relinquished his favorite spot on Aina’s shoulder, almost as if out of consideration for the little girl.

For hours, we marched onward without a single break. We crossed a fast-flowing river, walked along the edge of a cliff so tall we couldn’t see the bottom of it, and cut through a patch of carnivorous plants, all without stopping for a

single second. We climbed a mountain, crossed a wide valley, then climbed another mountain. If it hadn't been for Rolf regularly casting body-strengthening and recovery spells on Aina and me, we definitely wouldn't have been able to handle the pace. But after a grueling twelve-hour hike and just as the sun was sinking below the horizon once more, the Immortal Dragon's lair finally hove into view.

"Over there," the fairies' clan leader said, pointing to a stonelike structure at the foot of the mountain. "The Immortal Dragon lives in those ruins." The structure was absolutely covered in creeping plants which made it hard to distinguish what it was at first glance, but yup, they were most definitely ruins, all right.

"That's a really tiny dungeon," Raiya muttered quietly beside me, though the fairies' clan leader heard him all the same.

"It used to be an altar to the Immortal Dragon, but at some point, people stopped worshipping it, and the altar was abandoned. The Immortal Dragon uses these ruins as its lair now," the old fairy explained, even though no one had asked. "Well, then. As per our agreement, I have brought you to the dragon. I shall now head back to the dwelling."

"A-Are you sure you'll be fine on the return trip by yourself, grandpa?" Patty asked.

"Patty, I may not be as powerful as you, but I assure you, my magic is more than enough to get me back to the dwelling safe and sound," the fairies' leader replied.

"I-Is that so?" Patty said, still looking a little worried.

"Yes. Goodbye now. Patty, be sure to show your face at the dwelling from time to time, yes?"

And with that, he was off. *He always looks so serious, but it seems the fairies' clan leader is something of a free spirit*, I thought. *Though I guess he is a relative of Patty's, so maybe I shouldn't be so surprised about that.*

"Bye, grand—I mean, clan leader!" Patty called after him, waving, and it seemed as though she was a little sad to see him go so soon.



“So all we have to do is get down this mountain somehow, huh?” I said, then turned to the head of our expedition. “What’s the plan, Ney?”

On the one hand, night had nearly fallen and making our way down the mountainside in the dark would no doubt prove quite difficult, but on the other hand, we were within touching distance of our target. It was a tough call.

“Well, we don’t know how long it will take the demons to track us down,” Ney mused, weighing up the options. “And the Immortal Dragon’s lair is right there.” She thought for a brief moment, then said, “No, let’s not waste any more time. Let’s just go.”

Her ultimate decision was to keep moving.

“Take out your lanterns, everyone,” Ney instructed. “Mages, please cast illumination spells.”

The adventurers did as ordered and rummaged through their rucksacks for their lanterns. All of a sudden, Patty peered upward at the reddening sky with a grim expression on her face.

“Something wrong, boss?” I asked her.

“Hush! Don’t talk, Shiro,” she said hurriedly, bringing a finger up to her lips, her eyes fixed on the sky above. She stayed like that for a good thirty seconds before speaking again. “I sense something with incredibly strong magic coming our way. I think it’s that demon from yesterday.”

That meant Celes was getting closer and closer.

This got an instant reaction out of Ney. “Are you sure, Patty?”

“O-Of course I am! I’m never wrong! Whatever’s coming this way has the exact same magic as that demon!”

“Patty can identify someone based solely on their magic, guildmaster,” Nesca explained. “She’s never been wrong before.”

“I see...” Ney said. “That’s not good.”

“Patty, how long until she gets here?” Nesca asked the little fairy.

“What kind of question is that? She’s flying! She’ll be here in *seconds*!” Patty said.

Ney immediately turned to address the adventurers. “Everyone, prepare for battle! We’re going to fight that demon!”

“Yes, guildmaster!” the adventurers replied in unison.

“We’ll stay up here and slow the demon down,” Ney said to me before pointing to the ruins. “Shiro, you and your sisters take Suama to her mother.”

“Ney—” I started to protest, but she cut me off.

“If you’re here, we won’t be able to focus on the fight. Do you have any idea how difficult it is to swing a sword around effectively while you’re also trying to protect someone?”

I didn’t know what to say to that. Seeing that I was at a loss for words, Raiya placed a hand on my shoulder. “The GM’s right, man. You and your sisters go on ahead. I can even get Kilpha to go with you, if you want. And I’m sure that little boss of yours will tag along too.”

“O-Of course!” Patty piped up. “I’m Shiro and Aina’s boss! It’s my duty!”

“See? With your super strong, reliable boss by your side, you’ll be a-okay, even without the rest of us there to protect you,” Raiya said, flashing me a grin before turning to Kilpha. “Well then, Kilpha, I leave him in your capable hands!”

The cat-sith nodded. I’d been friends with the Blue Flash crew for quite a while by this point, so even though Raiya didn’t outwardly say it, I knew he was sending Kilpha with us because there might be traps in the ruins. He had thought of that possibility and decided to send one of his invaluable party members with us.

“I’ll take them to the ruins, meow,” Kilpha said. “But, Raiya, you better not die on me, okay, meow? That goes for you too, Rolf and Nesca.”

“There’s no way I’m dying here,” Raiya said. “I fully intend to get Shiro to repay me with free booze when this whole thing is over.”

He punctuated his sentence with a cheeky smirk and I couldn’t help thinking he sounded really cool in that moment. The twins, however, started muttering

behind me.

“Did you hear that, Saorin? That was totally a flag, wasn’t it?”

“Yup! Like, a *huge* death flag. He might *actually* die now.”

Okay, I definitely needed to have a discussion with the two of them about what was and wasn’t appropriate to say in front of people. I made a mental note to do that when the mission was all wrapped up. And I’d make sure to scold them in front of everyone to teach them a lesson.

“All righty!” I said, slapping my cheeks to pump myself up. “Aina, are you ready?” I asked the little girl.

“Yeah!”

“Are you, boss?”

“Who do you think you’re talking to?” Patty scoffed. “I was born ready!”

“How about you, Peace?” I asked the little kitten.

Meow!

“Shiori-chan, Saori, you know it’s not too late for you two to go back to grandma’s house, right?” I said to my sisters.

“Stop trying to be funny, bro. Your face is already enough of a joke on its own,” Saori said, rolling her eyes at me.

“Save the sleep-talking for when you’re actually asleep, okay, bro-bro?” Shiori said.

“You two are so rude to your big brother,” I moaned. “But fine. I get the picture. You’re coming with.”

I hoicked Suama up my back a little because she was starting to slip down. My body was on the verge of keeling over, but I wasn’t about to give up so close to the finish line. I gave a brief nod to Kilpha, who was looking at me as if asking if I was ready to set off, and she returned the nod.

“Follow me, meow!” she said, setting off down the mountain at a brisk pace. We followed her as fast as we could so as not to lose track of her.

A few minutes later, a huge explosion rang out behind us, followed by a

furious scream.

Intermission

“So weak,” Celesdia spat. Aside from her face, her entire body had metamorphosed into some kind of monstrous-looking creature. Adventurers lay on the ground all around her.

“Crap...” Raiya wheezed. “She’s... She’s so strong...” He attempted to get to his feet by using his broken sword to support his body weight.

“Stop squirming, weakling.” Celesdia swung her large snakelike tail at him and sent him flying into a nearby tree, a noise of pain escaping Raiya’s lips as he struck it.

Celesdia was insanely strong. Twenty-one silver-ranked and three gold-ranked adventurers had come on this mission—a force strong enough to easily overpower the kingdom’s Order of Chivalry—yet Celesdia had managed to defeat all of them by herself.

“Stop wasting my time. Where is Shiro? Where is the Immortal Dragon’s egg?”

“I don’t know,” Nesca replied, staring down Celesdia. She was hurting all over and she’d run out of mana. She didn’t even have enough left to throw a Fireball, one of the lowest-level spells she knew. “And even if I did know, I would never tell you,” she spat at the demon. For the sake of her friends, she was still standing, despite her exhaustion.

“You don’t like me very much, do you?” Celesdia mused aloud before raising her arm and swinging it toward Nesca, who could only watch helplessly as the demon’s sharp claws drew closer and closer.

“Miss Nesca!” Rolf cried as he threw himself at Nesca. He managed to propel her out of the way just as Celesdia’s attack was about to land, and luckily, the demon’s claws only grazed the battle priest’s shoulder.

“Thanks, Rolf,” Nesca said.

“Let us save the words of gratitude for when this ordeal is over,” he replied.

Nesca nodded. "Right."

The two of them got back to their feet, leaning on each other for support. There wasn't a single adventurer who was able to stand on their own. Even the gold-ranked adventurers had been comprehensively defeated. There was no possible way for them to win against this demon.

"To be quite honest, I'm a little surprised," Celesdia said.

"Well, well," a wounded Ney said with difficulty through gritted teeth. "I didn't..." She paused to gasp for air. "I didn't think anything could surprise a demon." Her right arm was bent at a weird angle, but her left arm had escaped injury. She grabbed her sword with it and slowly got to her feet. "Was it perhaps my beauty that took you by surprise?" she asked.

"This is the second time I am hearing about this thing you call 'beauty.' Warriors only need to be able to fight. Appearance is quite irrelevant," Celesdia retorted.

"What a sad outlook on life you have," Ney wheezed. "It's a shame, because you're quite pretty yourself, you know. Though not as pretty as me, of course."

"You like to run your mouth a lot, don't you? Is that how you humes choose your captains? Do you simply pick whoever talks the most?"

"I wouldn't say I talk that much. You're just a woman of few words," Ney said simply. "Anyway, may I ask what exactly has 'surprised' you? I would appreciate it if you told me. Just for future reference, you know?"

"I'm impressed by how stubborn you humes are. You refuse to yield to me, even though I am much stronger than all of you combined. I had no idea humes could be so obstinate."

Celesdia was a "devil," one of the sixteen tribes humes often referred to collectively as "demons." The only thing that mattered to devils was strength, and in the majority of cases, merely being weak was enough to forfeit your right to live. Having been raised in that environment, Celesdia found humes incredibly peculiar.

"Why did you stand up just then?" the demon continued. "Why do you still want to fight me?"

Ney's lips curled upward slightly at Celesdia's question. "Pride, belief, friendship. Everyone has their own reasons," she answered.

Celesdia shook her head. "No, I don't understand. Listen up, captain of the humes."

"What is it?"

"A warrior such as yourself must have noticed already, yes? You must know by now that I've been holding back this entire time, so that I wouldn't kill you."

Ney didn't say anything. Of course she had noticed that. All of her adventurers were lying injured on the ground, but none of their wounds were fatal, and she knew the sole reason for that was because Celesdia had been holding back.

"It wasn't in my plans to fight humes. I have no intention of killing you."

"What are you getting at?" Ney asked.

"All I want is the Immortal Dragon's egg," Celesdia said. "If you give it to me, I promise I will leave this instant."

Ney thought about this. They had been fighting Celesdia for a while, so it was a safe bet that Suama was back with her mother by this point. "Are you speaking the truth?" she asked.

"I swear it in the name of Dumoz, the God of Darkness."

Surely even a demon as strong as Celesdia wouldn't be able to lay a finger on the Immortal Dragon, right?

"I understand," Ney said. She resheathed her sword and smoothed her hair back elegantly, as if she had just won the battle. "Unfortunately for you, though, the egg is probably back with its progenitor by now."

"Progenitor? What does that mean?" Celesdia queried.

Ney chuckled. "It means the dragon's parent. Its mother."

Celesdia's eyes grew wide upon hearing these words, but after a couple of seconds, she started shaking uncontrollably before finally doubling over with laughter.

“Its mother? Did you just say it was back with its *mother*?” she said, sounding a little out of breath due to how much she was laughing.

Ney frowned. “What...” she started. “What’s so amusing?”

“Oh, I just couldn’t help myself. After all, you said it was back with its mother.” Celesdia had to pause as another bout of laughter escaped her lips. “So I assume that means you do not know, hm? Well, I am sorry to be the one breaking this to you, captain of the humes, but...”

The words Celesdia uttered next completely extinguished any slight glimmer of hope Ney had left.

“The mother of that egg has been dead for a very, very long time.”

Chapter Twenty-Four: The Mother Dragon

As it turned out, there wasn't a single trap in the ruins. Kilpha led the way down a small corridor that opened out into a large, spacious chamber with a stone altar in the middle of it.

"No way..." I gasped.

On the stone altar lay the Immortal Dragon. Or more like what was left of her, which was a pile of bones. Suama was forever pointing to the forest and whining for her "ma-ma," so I'd naturally assumed that, if I brought her to where she was pointing, I could reunite her with her mother. But it looked as though her mother was long gone.

"Mister Shiro, is that..." Aina said hesitantly. "Is that Little Su's mama?"

"That's..." I started before trailing off, unsure how to answer.

I was still trying to formulate a sentence when I felt Suama hop off my back. She toddled over to the altar and looked up at her mother's skeleton.

"Ma-ma?" she said to the bones, and when she didn't get an answer, she tried again. "Ma-ma?"

"Suama..." I softly called over to her.

She ignored me. "Ma-ma! Ma-ma!"

She cried out for her mother over and over. Tears welled up in her golden eyes and slowly trickled down her cheeks.

"Ma-ma..."

Then all of a sudden, her body started to glow and she turned back into her dragon form, which resembled a small puppy. The tiny wings on her back flapped away, and she lifted herself up to her mother's bones on the altar. As she landed, she let out a plaintive, heart-wrenching whine.

"Kyupi... Kyupi..." she wailed repeatedly, rubbing her cheek against her mother's skull.

“Little Su...” Aina breathed beside me, her eyes glistening with unshed tears.

And she wasn't the only one who was touched by the raw emotion of the scene. The twins, Patty, and Kilpha all looked like they were on the verge of bursting into tears.

“Sua—” I started but was interrupted by a voice from behind me.

“I see. So the egg has already hatched.”

The second I heard that voice, a chill ran up my spine. I turned around, and sure enough, Celesdia was standing at the entrance to the chamber, drenched in blood.

“I have found you, Shiro,” she said to me before her eyes landed on Suama. “And the Immortal Dragon's child too, it seems.”



“So this is why you didn't bring the egg to me,” she said as she slowly walked toward us, swaying like a ghost. “I hadn't even considered the possibility that it might have already hatched.”

I caught sight of a group of demons behind her that I assumed were probably her underlings. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Kilpha move to stand in Celes's path, her shoulders shaking with fear. The demon made a quizzical noise and cocked an eyebrow, as if asking what she thought she was doing.

“What did...” the cat-sith said, but her voice dropped so low that no one could make out the rest of the question.

“What was that?” Celes asked.

“What did you do to my friends, meow?” Kilpha repeated, a little louder this time.

Celes sighed. “Do I really have to spell it out for you? After all, I am standing here. What more explanation do you need?”

As soon as these words had left the demon's mouth, Kilpha shrieked angrily and rushed toward Celes with her daggers in her hands.

“You're in my way,” Celes said, sounding bored by this display. She formed a

fist with one of her monstrous arms and swung it downward, slamming the cat-sith into the stone floor.

“Kilpha!” I yelled.

But she didn’t answer. She didn’t even twitch. *Is she dead?*

“Relax. That wasn’t enough to kill a beastwoman,” Celes reassured me, likely sensing my panic. She stepped over the unconscious Kilpha and walked toward us.

Uh-oh.

My mouth reacted quicker than my brain. “Shiori! Saori!” I yelled. “Take Suama and Aina and ru—”

“Do you really think I would let you just run away from me again?” Celes scoffed as her arm transformed into some sort of tentacle-like appendage that then extended all the way to the altar and wrapped itself around Suama, who shrieked in surprise. As soon as the little dragon girl was firmly in its grasp, Celes’s arm shrunk back again, and just like that, she had captured Suama, all in a matter of seconds.

“Suama!” I cried.

“Finally...” Celes breathed. “I finally have it.” A smile spread across her lips.

Once again, I found my body reacting before my brain had time to think, and I started running toward Celes with my arms extended out in front of me, all but throwing myself at the demon in an attempt to get Suama back.

“How futile,” Celes remarked, and she flicked her hand at the air in front of her as if trying to swat a mosquito. That tiny movement was enough to create a strong gust of wind that sent me flying, and even after landing heavily on the hard stone floor, I carried on rolling backward until I crashed into the wall.

“Mister Shiro!” Aina exclaimed, and she immediately started running toward me, but the twins stopped her.

“Don’t, Aina!” Saori warned.

“Stay here with us,” Shiori said softly.

Patty, on the other hand, made it over to me in record time. “Shiro!” she yelled in my face as she slapped my cheeks a few times. “A-Are you okay?! Are you dead?! You’re not dead, are you?!”

“I-I’m...” I wheezed. “I’m fine, b-boss...”

My ribs ached and just the simple act of breathing hurt like hell, but through sheer willpower alone, I managed to stand up and cast a glare dripping with venom in the direction of Celes. Hovering next to me, Patty did the same.

“Don’t worry, Shiro. I’ll take care of these guys. They won’t know what hit ‘em!” Patty said, but I could see her little knees shaking. She was terrified. Even a being as powerful as Patty was afraid of Celes.

Celes snorted derisively at the fairy’s bravado. She turned around and handed Suama to one of her underlings. “Ready the teleport gate,” she instructed. “I’m nearly done here.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The demons behind Celes bowed their heads, then departed from the ruins, taking Suama with them.

“Let’s get this over with quickly, then,” Celes said as she turned back toward me. “Preparing a teleport gate takes a very long time and requires an astronomical amount of mana to activate. You need about eight high-ranked sorcerers working on it at the same time to even get it going. So it would be a much better use of my time and mana if I went and helped them. However...” She paused and cast a look full of mock-pity in my direction. “I seem to recall saying I would kill you if you didn’t keep your word. Do you remember that, Shiro?”

I gritted my teeth, unable to answer. The word “Death” floated up vividly in my mind’s eye.

Celes chuckled at my reaction. “Now, now. There’s no need to look so scared. Like I said, I don’t have time to—”

“I won’t let you lay a finger on him!” Patty yelled, hovering in front of me. “Take *this*!”

Several blasts of wind instantly unleashed from her fingertips. I’d seen this spell before, and knew that these blasts were actually blades made of wind that

could slice up any foe.

But Celes simply stared at Patty, unimpressed. “Wind magic, huh? Terrible choice.”

That was all she said before opening her mouth wide to allow us to see the beams of light that were converging inside, and not even a second later, a scorching heat ray shot past her lips and destroyed Patty’s wind blades.

“What?!” the little fairy exclaimed, her jaw practically hitting the floor at what she’d just witnessed.

The heat ray kept going, however, getting closer and closer, and burning everything in its path. It was on a collision course with Patty, and it would reach her in a matter of seconds.

“Boss, watch out!”

“Sh-Shiro, you idiot! Move out of the way!”

“No!”

I had thrown myself in front of the fairy and clasped her to my chest with my back facing the all-consuming heat ray. I knew I didn’t have time to summon the closet door before the beam reached us. *Crap, I thought. I have to do something! Anything! If I could at least get Patty to safety somehow...*

The ray was almost upon us.

Mrrreow!

All of a sudden, Peace meowed loudly.

Chapter Twenty-Five: Immortal

“Are you okay, Shiro?” a familiar voice asked me.

I had unconsciously closed my eyes at some point, but the moment I heard this voice, they immediately snapped open to be met by the sight of...

“Grandma?”

“That was a close call, wasn’t it? The second I reestablished my link with Peace, I saw you were about to bite the big one, so I rushed on over here. Thankfully, I made it just in time.”

Grandma—or rather, Alice the Immortal Witch—was standing right in front of me, wielding her magic sword, Melkipson. We seemed to be inside some sort of dome made of light, which I assumed must have been a barrier grandma had put up to protect us from Celes’s attack. Peace meowed again, and I couldn’t help thinking he looked extremely pleased with himself. Though in a way, it *was* thanks to him that I hadn’t been burnt to a crisp by Celes’s heat beam. Guess the little guy wasn’t just grandma’s familiar for show, huh?

Still firmly clasped to my chest, Patty stared up at grandma, her eyes as wide as saucers and her mouth opening and closing a few times in shock. “Shiro, it’s your grandma...” she finally managed to get out, her voice hoarse and strangled. “Sh-Shiro! It’s your grandma! She *came!*”

I nodded. “That she did, boss. That she did.”

“Uh, b-bro? What are you talking about? Why are you calling her ‘grandma’?” asked Saori, who must have overheard the conversation.

“I mean, that’s Alice-san, right?” Shiori piped up next.

The two of them seemed very puzzled.

“Ah. Sorry, grandma. I think I may have kinda ruined your surprise,” I said sheepishly.

“It’s fine. Your life’s more important than some stupid surprise,” grandma said

with a shrug. “That aside, what did you think of my grand entrance? Cool, wasn’t it? I feel a bit like an action hero right now,” she said, winking at me.

“It was very cool. You looked just like a superhero. They’re actually all the rage at the moment when it comes to action movies.”

“Oh, is that so? Maybe I’ll watch one when we get home, then. But first...”
Grandma paused, shifted her gaze to Celes, and pointed her sword at her. “I believe this young demon lady wants to play a little, hm?”



Celes gritted her teeth and took a few steps back. “What an overwhelming presence. What in the world are you?” she asked, bloodlust dripping from every word.

But grandma seemed completely unfazed by the demon’s glare. “Who, me? Oh, I’m Shiro’s grandma. I don’t generally make a habit of meddling in my grandson’s disputes, but I do feel compelled to intervene when he’s about to buy the farm.” She lightly swung Melkipson around and an untold number of magic circles instantly appeared in the air. “Now listen here, young demon lady. I don’t know what exactly has happened between you and my grandson, but I volunteer to take his place as your opponent,” she said, then immediately launched an attack.

Lightning bolts, fireballs, and shards of ice all flew toward Celes at the same time. There was a boom, then a roar, then another boom, followed shortly by screams of agony. The sheer ferocity of grandma’s attack caused the roof to cave in, burying Celes under a pile of rubble. A profound silence descended on the ruins as the twin moons peeked through the newly formed hole in the ceiling.

“G-Grandma!” I exclaimed when I eventually regained the ability to speak.

“What is it?” she asked nonchalantly. “Are you fretting about that young demon lady? Oh, don’t worry about her, Shiro. That wasn’t enough to kill a demon.”

With a single attack, grandma had managed to completely turn the tables on Celes.

“No! That’s not the issue!” I said, grabbing grandma by the shoulders. “Suama... The Immortal Dragon’s daughter was abducted by the demons!”

“The Immortal Dragon’s daughter?” grandma repeated quizzically. She glanced at the altar and saw the remains piled up there.

“I see. So that’s the Immortal Dragon’s—” she started, but I interrupted her because time was of the essence.

“Yes! Yes, it is! And Suama is...” I paused, then breathlessly tried to explain the situation. “You remember that egg Saori found in the forest? Well, it turns

out it was a dragon egg, and we called the baby dragon that hatched out of it Suama, and Shiori and Saori made her call them both ‘mommy,’ and she’s also Aina’s little sister and, and, and she’s my... She’s my...” I paused in my word vomit as I tried to find the right way to finish my sentence.

Papa.

“She’s my daughter. Suama’s my *daughter!*”

Grandma blinked at me, clearly taken aback, but a few seconds later, the corners of her lips curled upward. “Your daughter, huh? Well, then. That makes her my great-granddaughter, and that means we have to go rescue—”

“I won’t let you,” a voice interrupted her.

I instinctively turned in the direction of the voice and saw a large black mass crawling out from underneath the rubble.

“The Immortal Dragon is mine. I won’t let anyone have it.”

It was Celes. Her body had completely metamorphosed by this point: her lower half looked exactly like a horse’s, she had grown a second pair of arms, and jet black wings had sprouted from her back. But the most astonishing thing of all was how huge she was. Her body had more than doubled in size, and she was now a whopping five meters tall.

Grandma looked at her with eyes full of pity. “So you have devouring abilities, do you? I can only imagine how many creatures you must have consumed to reach that size.”

“I had to be strong to survive,” the demon retorted. “That’s all there is to it.”

“How pitiful. You devils always turn out this way,” grandma sighed as she readjusted her grip on Melkipson. “Shiro, I’ll deal with her.” She paused and pointed to the altar. “You go resurrect the Immortal Dragon.”

“Huh? What are you talking about? Can’t you see the dragon’s—” I started, but grandma cut me off.

“Wait until I’ve finished talking, will you?” she chided me. “The Immortal Dragon can’t die permanently, hence the name. Even if she’s only a skeleton, all you need to resurrect her is some mana.” Grandma paused and glanced at the

little fairy I was still clutching in my arms. “Patty, was it?”

“Wh-Wh-What do you want?” Patty squeaked.

“Patty, I need you to go over there and pour some of your mana into the Immortal Dragon’s dragon-core crystal. That’s what the gem on the forehead is called. And you, Shiro...”

“Yeah?” I said.

“Once the crystal starts glowing again, you’re gonna need to offer the dragon some blood.”

“Some blood?” I blinked. “Like a... Like a *sacrifice*?” I asked, horrified.

“No, no, nothing like that,” grandma chuckled. “A few drops of your own blood will do. Just let the blood drip onto its dragon-core crystal, then make your wish. But remember, you have to put your heart and soul into the wish if you want it to work. You got all that?”

But grandma didn’t even wait for me to reply before turning back to Celes again. “Well now, young demon lady. Ready or not, here I come!”

She raised Melkipson above her head, and all of a sudden, the ground beneath Celes’s feet exploded upward, sending the demon flying through the gaping hole in the ceiling. With an almighty leap, grandma swiftly followed her outside. *Whoa, whoa. Are you kidding me? She can fly too? She’s seriously just like an actual superhero! No, now’s not the time to stand around, marveling at all the stuff grandma can do,* I told myself. *I have a dragon to resurrect!*

“Boss, go pour your mana into that dragon-core crystal thingy grandma was talking about!” I said to Patty.

“Way ahead of you,” the little fairy called back as she flew over to the Immortal Dragon’s remains on the altar.

Just like grandma had said, there really was a dull-looking crystal embedded in the dragon’s skull.

“Boss!”

“Right!” the little fairy said determinedly, placing her hand on the crystal. “Watch closely, you hear, Shiro? My magic... My magic is so powerful, i-it can

even resurrect dragons!”

Patty let out a little grunt of concentration as her body started to emit a faint glow. Light amassed in her hand, then moved toward the crystal, effectively recharging it. The little fairy gritted her teeth and grunted again, much louder this time, as droplets of perspiration formed over her entire body.

“You can do it, boss!” I said, cheering her on.

Aina joined in. “Keep going, Patty!”

“You’ve got this!” Saori chimed in at almost the same time that her twin added, “Hang in there!”

All of a sudden, blood gushed from Patty’s nose, painting the lower half of her face red.

“B-Boss?!” I exclaimed, my eyes practically bulging out of their sockets in shock.

“Patty!” Aina cried out.

But the little fairy didn’t even flinch. She just kept relentlessly pouring her mana into the crystal.

“Bro! It’s starting to glow!” Saori exclaimed, pointing at the crystal.

She was right. There was a flickering light inside the crystal, blinking in a slow, steady rhythm, almost as if mimicking a heartbeat.

“Well? Wh-What do you think of that?” Patty chuckled smugly just before her body went limp and her wings stopped flapping. Thankfully, Shiori managed to catch the little fairy before she hit the ground, and the teenager cradled the tiny creature tenderly to her chest.

It was my turn next. I took my multipurpose knife out of my bag and made a cut on my index finger, though I ended up going a lot deeper than I’d intended, probably spurred on by Patty’s gutsy display. I held my hand directly above the dragon’s skull and let my blood drip onto the crystal, staining it red. I recalled grandma’s words: *Just let the blood drip onto its dragon-core crystal, then make your wish. But remember, you have to put your heart and soul into the wish if you want it to work.*

I closed my eyes and started praying.

Suama...

Please lend me your power to save Suama. To save your daughter. She's my precious daughter too. I have to save her! So please, come back to life and help me rescue her. Come back to life!

I poured all of my feelings into the prayer, just like grandma had told me to.

"Bro-bro?" Shiori called out to me.

I opened my eyes.

"Look, bro-bro, something's happening. They look like...veins? And they're spreading out all over the dragon's body. It's like cell division!"

"Whoa..." I breathed.

Like Shiori had said, veinlike fronds that pulsed like regular blood vessels had started sprouting from the dragon-core crystal and spreading over the skeleton. A layer of flesh appeared next, stretching out and covering the entirety of the burgeoning body. Aina, the twins, and I had never seen anything like it before, and all we could do was gawk at the spectacle. For some reason, the word "Reincarnation" flashed in front of my mind's eye, and several minutes later, the skeleton had fully transformed into a beautiful white dragon with bluish wings. She opened her eyes and cast a tender yet intense gaze over us.

"Master," she said, looking at me.

"M-Master? Wh-Who, me?" I asked, taken aback.

The dragon nodded. *She must consider the person whose blood drips on the crystal her master, I guess?*

"Master. My daughter." The dragon stooped so that her body was on our level. This was her way of telling us to climb onto her back.

"B-Bro?" Saori prompted me with a nudge.

"Let's go!" I said, jumping up onto the dragon's back. Saori hoicked Kilpha—who was still out cold—onto the dragon, while Shiori mounted the beast with

Patty still cradled to her chest.

“Immortal Dragon, chase after those demons!” I commanded once we were all seated on her back. “Let’s go save Suama. Let’s go save your daughter!”

“Yes, master.”

The Immortal Dragon raised her head and breathed flames in the direction of what was left of the ceiling, which pretty much instantly disintegrated. The white dragon then spread her mighty blue wings and took to the air.

Suama, papa’s coming to get you.

Chapter Twenty-Six: The Resolution

“Mister Shiro! Look! Little Su’s over there!” Aina called out when she caught sight of the little dragon.

The Immortal Dragon was *fast*. And not only that, but she also seemed to somehow know the exact location of her daughter, so we basically found Suama in no time. The Immortal Dragon landed right in front of the demons and began to size them up.

Still in dragon form, Suama joyfully cried out, “Kyupi!” She looked at me, then at the twins and Aina, then finally her gaze settled on her mother.

“Oh, that was a lot quicker than I thought it’d be,” remarked grandma, who was engaged in battle with the demons. She didn’t seem to have a single scratch on her. The same couldn’t be said for Celes, however, who was looking rather worse for wear, covered from head to toe as she was in wounds, some of which were still oozing blood.

“The Immortal Dragon has resurrected?” she said, groaning in pain.

It seemed even she hadn’t known the Immortal Dragon could be brought back to life. She let out a horrifying shriek, and just like earlier, she opened her mouth wide and light started converging inside it. She fired off another heat ray at us, only this time, the beam was much broader and it was aimed straight at the Immortal Dragon.

“How foolish,” the dragon said.

I didn’t really understand what happened next, but the long and short of it was the heat ray bounced off what I could only assume was a barrier the Immortal Dragon had erected around herself and vanished harmlessly into the sky. It quickly became apparent that Celes had no way of hurting us, for she couldn’t even land a scratch on the Immortal Dragon, and that one huge heat ray must have been the most powerful attack she was capable of, judging by how she was staring at the dragon in disbelief, as if she couldn’t get her head

around just how easily her attack had been repelled.

“Celes,” I said, my tone soft but firm. “Release Suama.”

As these words passed my lips, the Immortal Dragon raised one of her front legs and wafted it around in the air twice, creating a huge gust of wind so strong, the trees around us snapped in half, and Celes and her underlings went flying. With a single shake of her front limb, the Immortal Dragon had managed to bowl over an entire group of demons. *Suama’s mother is way too OP!*

“Kyupi!” Suama squealed happily, finally freed from the demons’ clutches. She took to the air and flew straight into my arms.

“Suama!” I exclaimed in a mix of joy and relief.

“Kyupi! Kyupi!”

I clasped her to my chest, and the twins and Aina joined us for a group hug. The little dragon rubbed her cheek against mine over and over, just as she had done the day she hatched out of the egg.

“I got you, Suama, I got you.” I laughed, her soft fur tickling me.

“Kyupi!”

“Welcome back, Suama,” I said tenderly, hugging her even tighter. I turned my head and my eyes landed on the demon who had abducted her. “Celes...” I breathed.

Her body had reverted to its normal form, and she looked completely disheveled, with every single inch of her body covered in wounds large and small. There was no mistaking the look of frustration she shot me.

“Celes, let’s end this, yeah?” I suggested.

She was silent for a moment, then nodded. “I lost. Kill me,” she said, hanging her head and closing her eyes.

Kill me. Those two words hit me like a punch to the gut.

“Well, you heard what the lady had to say, Shiro,” grandma piped up. “What do you want to do? Are you going to kill her?” she asked me.

I pondered this for a moment or two. “What do you think I should do?” I

eventually responded.

“That’s your choice to make, not mine,” grandma said. “I lent a hand with the fighting, but the rest is between you and her.”

“Aw, c’mon. You’re already involved in this. Can’t you help me out here?” I pleaded with her.

“Nope,” she replied firmly. “This is your battle, Shiro. You’re the one who has to settle it.”

I scratched my cheek, unsure what to do.

“Why are you hesitating, bro?!” Saori exclaimed. “She abducted Suama *and* tried to kill you! You have to do *something*! Even if you don’t, like, actually go as far as killing her, you should at least break her arms and legs!”

“Saori...” I said.

“It’s called retribution, bro-bro,” Shiori chimed in, reiterating her twin’s point. “If you do something bad, you can’t go complaining if the same thing gets done to you. You’ve gotta make her face the consequences now.”

“Shiori-chan...”

Well, it seemed both of my sisters were in agreement that, even if I didn’t ultimately end Celes’s life, I had to at least hurt her badly enough to make her reflect on her actions. Then all of a sudden, the faces of the Blue Flash crew—minus Kilpha, who was still out cold next to us—floated up in my mind. This woman had killed my friends, plus dozens of other adventurers who had done absolutely nothing wrong.

“E-Excuse me...”

Aina’s voice pulled me out of my thoughts.

“Aina?” I said, surprised by her intervention.

“Um, Mister Shiro...” She paused and I could see her little face was all scrunched up, as if she was on the verge of bursting into tears. “C-Could you please forgive Miss Celes and her friends?”

My jaw practically hit the floor. “You want me to *forgive* them?” I repeated,

utterly dumbfounded by this request. “She *abducted* you, Aina! Why in the world would you want me to forgive her?”

“Because she told me why she wanted Little Su,” Aina said.

Celes shot her a panicked glare. “Be quiet, Aina.”

But the little girl simply shook her head. “No, I have to tell him. I want Mister Shiro to know.”

And with that, Aina told us Celes’s story.

Side Story: Celesdia

Celesdia wanted her to survive. All she wanted was for her to stay by her side. And for that reason, Celesdia resolved to become stronger.

To the north of all the large hume continents lay a solitary island inhabited by demons. Unlike the land the humes lived on, the soil of this island was positively brimming with mana, and naturally, such a high mana concentration had a huge impact on the island's flora and fauna, meaning that over the centuries, the monsters on the island had grown stronger and stronger, and the plants had all evolved to become highly toxic. Crops found it a struggle to thrive in such a harsh environment, making it almost impossible for the demons to turn their hands to any form of agriculture. And it was here, in this unforgiving land, that Celesdia was born.

The tribes that inhabited this island—the “demons,” as the humes referred to them—*had* to be strong. Since they couldn't rely on farming to survive, they had no choice but to hunt the overpowered monsters for their meat. This ruthless environment meant you couldn't be weak, because being weak was basically a death sentence. There was only one way the weak could survive, and that was by depending on those stronger than them. The strong would provide them with food, protect them from the monsters, and fend off any attacks by the other tribes, but in exchange, the weak had to forfeit all of their worldly possessions, and even their own lives belonged to the strong. As such, the weak weren't allowed to make their own choices, and for the entirety of their lives, all they could do was follow the orders of the strong. And if someone stronger decided to kill them on a whim, there was nothing they could do about it. That was just the way things were here.

However, there were also individuals who were even weaker than those who were already considered weak. Not only were they unable to fend for themselves, their bodies couldn't even withstand the high mana concentration on the island. They most likely had a much lower mana resistance than the other demons, but it was unclear what caused this condition. Even monster

meat was too full of mana for them to be able to eat it. All their bodies could stomach were the weedy crops they nurtured with their own frail hands attached to equally weedy arms, as they prayed that their efforts would be enough for them to live one more day. That was all they could do.

Celesdia's younger sister was one such weedy individual. Her name was Mifa. When her parents found out that her body was unable to withstand the ambient mana, they immediately turned their backs on her. The strong lived and the weak died. That was the natural order of things here.

But Celesdia didn't give up on her. After all, Mifa was her only sister. How could she just abandon her? And so, when her parents weren't looking, Celesdia would secretly harvest the weedy crops and bring them to Mifa.

"Thank you, dear sister," Mifa would always say as she took the meager meal from her with a radiant smile on her face.

Celesdia loved seeing her sister smile. She loved it more than anything else in the world. It never failed to make her feel all warm inside. In this dark and unforgiving world of the demons', where blood was shed on a daily basis, Mifa's smile was Celesdia's only light.

Years passed, and Celesdia became a strong warrior. Out of all the devils on the island, not a single one of them could hold a candle to her. The other tribes bowed their heads in submission in her presence and the other devils in her tribe regularly sang her praises. And when she officially announced that Mifa was under her protection, there wasn't a single word of complaint to be heard from the other demons.

But then, out of the blue, Mifa fell ill. She was diagnosed with what Celesdia was told was an "incurable disease." Naturally, Celesdia did everything in her power to try to save Mifa's life, but no doctor or shaman in the land seemed to have any idea how to cure her illness. Mifa was the only light in her older sister's life, and she was dying. Despair engulfed Celesdia. She didn't know what to do. But then, a member of the Shadow Dragon Tribe told her about the Immortal Dragon.

"The Immortal Dragon's flesh and blood have the power to cure *any* illness!" he had told her. Oh, how much hope those words had given her!

She immediately headed for the teleport gate that stood in one corner of the island. It was sealed, but Celesdia had heard that if enough mana were poured into it, you could use the gate to travel to any other teleport gate in the world. And it just so happened that there was a gate in the forest where the Immortal Dragon had made its lair.

Celesdia didn't waste a single second. She entrusted Mifa to her subordinates and gathered up all of the most proficient mages on the entire island to help her open the gate. She used brute force to break the seal, then started pouring mana into the gate. It took them a really long time and a gargantuan amount of mana, but finally, the gate was operational. She headed straight for the forest where she knew the Immortal Dragon had its lair, and after many, many days of wandering aimlessly around the woods, she finally found what she was looking for.

Full of hope, she crossed the threshold into the lair, only to find that the Immortal Dragon was long dead and all that remained of it was a huge pile of bones. Celesdia felt herself fall into despair once more, but that was when she found *it*. A large white egg was buried underneath the dragon's remains, almost as if it had been hidden there. The find made Celesdia ecstatic. An onlooker might even have described her as being mad with joy.

I can finally save Mifa.

All she had to do now was find a way to get this egg to hatch, then feed the blood and flesh of the creature inside to Mifa to make the "incurable disease" (or whatever it was called) afflicting her go away.

Yes, she could do it. She could protect her sister's smile. The only light in her life. Celesdia believed it was possible to save her.

Right up until the very last moment, she believed.

Final Chapter: Another Round of Bartering

After finishing the tale, Aina let out a long, exhausted sigh. So the reason Celes had wanted the egg all along was in order to save her little sister.

“Mister Shiro, please forgive Miss Celes,” Aina pleaded with me.

“Aina...” I started before trailing off.

While Aina was recounting Celes’s story, the image of her begging the demon to take her instead of Suama popped into my head. Granted, the situations were totally different, but at the end of the day, all the two of them had wanted was to protect their little sisters.

“Please, *please* forgive her,” Aina begged.

“D-Don’t do it, meow...” Kilpha uttered. She had regained consciousness by this point, though she still seemed a little weak, only able to stand by leaning heavily on Saori. But in spite of her exhaustion, her gaze was resolute and fixed on Celes. “Raiya, Nesca, Rolf...” she panted. “They’re dead... That demon... She killed them, meow. You can’t just forgive her, meow.”

I could see she was shaking from head to toe, likely due to her frustration and remorse at the death of her comrades at the hands of Celes.

“You have to avenge them, meow!” she told me, her breathing ragged.

“Kilpha...”

I was racked with indecision and had no idea what I should say, but all of a sudden, a voice dragged me out of my thoughts.

“Hold on a minute. Who are you calling ‘dead,’ Kilpha?”

Wait, I know that voice.

“Don’t ya think it’s a bit rude to go killing off your friends just like that?”

“Raiya, meow!” Kilpha exclaimed. “You’re alive, meow?”

Yup, that’s right. The voice belonged to Raiya. He was standing right there,

clear as day, and making his way toward us through the bushes. I quickly glanced down at his lower half and noted with some relief that he still had two legs and wasn't floating a few feet off the ground. Well, I had to double-check he wasn't a ghost, right?

Raiya's eyes landed on the Immortal Dragon and he whistled in awe. "Hot damn. So this is the Immortal Dragon, huh? But what are you doing on her back, man?"

"Wha..." I spluttered. "*I'm* the one who should be asking the questions here!" I was still feeling a little shaken up by the fact that Raiya was actually alive. "I thought you were—"

"Dead?"

"Well, yeah."

"I thought you were too, meow," Kilpha mumbled in a small voice.

"We just about survived, thanks to Rolf's healing magic and the potions we brought with us. Oh, and also because that demon over there was holding back the whole time," he said dejectedly, casting a bitter glance in the direction of Celes.

"'Don't kill a single hume.' That's what our leader told us. So I haven't," Celes explained matter-of-factly.

Wait, so when she told me she was going to "kill me," it was just an empty threat? I thought I was seriously going to die! Though there was someone who was even more outraged by this revelation.

"Hold on a second. Y-You had no issues trying to kill *me*!" Patty squeaked angrily.

Celes shrugged. "Our leader said nothing about fairies."

Patty made a frustrated noise and started stomping her feet on my head with all her might. *Could you please stop that, boss? My skull's about to cave in.*

"Raiya, are the others..."

"No, they're not dead. I mean, they *are* in a pretty bad state and I wouldn't call them one hundred percent *alive*, but they're not dead. That goes for Rolf,

Nesca, the GM, and all of the other adventurers.”

“So they’re only half dead,” I summed up.

“Precisely. We all are. In fact, we got beaten up so badly, it sorta pisses me off,” he replied, though despite what he said, he had a smile on his face, and the lightness of his tone did wonders for lifting the general mood.

I was incredibly relieved to find out that Celes hadn’t killed a single one of our comrades. From what Raiya had just told us, she had been holding back the entire time. Well, aside from that one attack she fired at Patty. I briefly wondered if Celes had started inwardly panicking when I threw myself in the way of that attack. It would’ve been bad news for her if she’d killed a hume, after all. Good thing grandma showed up just in time. In the end, she had saved me, Patty, and probably Celes to boot.

“Shiro, would it be all right if you didn’t kill me straight away?” asked Celes, who had been watching the situation unfold in silence. “There is something I would like to do first.”

“What is it?” I queried.

“I wish to speak to the Immortal Dragon.”

“Go ahead. We can set this whole ‘killing you’ stuff aside for the time being,” I said generously.

“Thank you,” Celes said, then she raised her eyes to look up at the Immortal Dragon. “Immortal Dragon...” she started softly. “Immortal Dragon, would you please let me have some of your flesh and blood?”

“Why should I heed such a request?” the Immortal Dragon responded. “You abducted my daughter.”

Celes bit her lower lip, then continued. “I beg you. Just a few drops of your blood will be fine. If you agree to it, I will offer you my body in exchange, for you to do with as you please.” She kneeled in front of Suama’s mother and lowered her head until it was practically touching the ground.

“It is not me you should be pleading with. This body of mine belongs to my master. If you wish to kneel in front of someone, it should be him.”

Um, excuse me, Ms. Immortal Dragon, but could you please not throw me under the bus like that? I mean, what am I supposed to do now? Oh crap. Celes is looking at me. Our eyes just met. Aaand she's kneeling in front of me now. Great. That's just peachy.

"Shiro, I beg you. Please instruct the Immortal Dragon to give me some of its blood. In exchange, I shall willingly hand myself over to you and become your devoted slave. My heart, my body, and even my life will be yours to do with as you please."

That's too much, Celes! Way too much! Why do you have to make it sound so dramatic?

"Shiorin, did you hear that?"

"I did!"

Beside me, the twins had started whispering to each other, completely unaware of my present inner turmoil.

"She said she'd become bro-bro's slave," Shiori said.

"What would he even do with a slave?"

Shiori hummed. "Dirty things, maybe?"

"You think so too, Shiorin? I mean, he *has* been staring at her chest this whole time. He's definitely thinking about doing naughty stuff to her!"

"I am *not*!" I protested.

I wasn't going to just stand there and let my little sisters slander me like that! But the two of them simply snickered, clearly amused by my reaction.

"Good grief, you two. This is a serious conversation!" I chastised them.

"So why are you staring at her boobs?" Saori retorted.

"I'm not staring at anything!"

I sighed and tried to refocus on the Celes situation, but before I got a chance to, Suama hopped down from her mother's back and toddled over to the demon, stopping right in front of her.

"Kyupi!" she squealed, holding out one of her front paws toward Celes.

Celes stared at her uncomprehendingly before shooting me a quizzical look, but I had no idea what Suama's intention was either. I turned to the Immortal Dragon, probably looking every bit as confused as Celes.

"Master, my daughter wishes to offer her blood to the demon," the Immortal Dragon translated for us.

"What?" I gasped, gawking at Suama in shock.

"Will you let her do so?" the Immortal Dragon asked me.

"Kyupi!" Suama squealed happily once more, thrusting her front paw toward Celes enthusiastically, looking just like a little kid who was super excited to get their blood drawn for the first time.

"Calm down, Suama," I said. "I appreciate how helpful you are being, but we don't have anything here that we can store your blood in."

"Kyupi?" she squeaked, looking at me quizzically.

"Like I said, it's really nice of you to want to help Celes, but let's just wait until we get back to town, okay?"

"Pi!" The baby dragon nodded and toddled back over to me. Celes watched her go, opening her mouth as if she wanted to say something before closing it immediately again.

"Happy with that, Celes? Suama said she'd give you some of her blood," I said.

"Thank you," Celes replied.

"Oh, I'm not the one you should be thanking. Suama volunteered to do it all by herself. Anyway, now we've gotten that out of the way, can you maybe forget all this talk about, uh, being a slave?"

Celes was silent for a moment, then said, "I'll think about it."

I hopped down from the back of the Immortal Dragon and walked over to Celes. "Good. Anyway, back to the topic at hand. Will your sister really be cured if she drinks some of Suama's—or well, some of the Immortal Dragon's blood?"

"That is what I have been told. I was informed that the Immortal Dragon's blood can heal even incurable diseases."

“What kind of illness does she have?” I asked, purely out of curiosity, though I absolutely was *not* expecting the words that came out of her mouth next.

“I have been told that it is known as the ‘Decaying Disease.’”

My jaw hit the floor and all I could manage was a strangled “Huh?” by way of response. In fact, I was so surprised, I stumbled forward and almost fell to the ground headfirst. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Aina was just as shocked as I was.

“Celes...” I breathed. “Did you just say your sister has the Decaying Disease?”

“Yes. I have heard that humes can also contract it. And...” she mumbled slowly and sadly, “that no one has ever recovered from it.”

The events of the last few days whirled around in my head. “Uh...” I started. “Okay, I’m going to tell you something, but I’ll warn you in advance: this is going to come as a huge shock to you.”

“What is it?” Celes asked, eyeing me suspiciously.

“You ready for this? Well, ready or not, here goes.” I paused briefly to clear my throat, then promptly dropped the bomb on her. “I actually have the cure for the Decaying Disease in my store’s stockroom.”

Celes didn’t say anything for a while, then eventually breathed a quiet “What?” to this news. I’d never seen her look so shaken.

“You don’t need the Immortal Dragon’s blood to cure her. I have the remedy for your sister’s illness at my store,” I said again, a little slower this time.

This time, Celes *did* react. “Wha... What did you just say?! But that’s impossible! You have a cure for the Decaying Disease? *You*?! A hume?! That’s —”

“Miss Celes, Mister Shiro is telling the truth!” Aina piped up.

“Aina...” the demon breathed.

The little girl came over and stood next to me. “My mama had the Decaying Disease too. But Mister Shiro gave her some medicine and now she’s not sick anymore!”

Raiya and Kilpha—who both knew Aina’s story—nodded to confirm that what the little girl was saying was true.

“The girlie’s right, demon lady. Shiro’s medicine really can cure the Decaying Disease,” Raiya said.

“And Stella’s doing great now, meow!” Kilpha added.

“Well, I wouldn’t say ‘great’ exactly,” Raiya said, glaring at Celes. “After all, right now, she’s laid up in bed due to the shock of her daughter being abducted by a certain *someone*.”

“Yeah, that’s right, meow!” Kilpha concurred. “And it’s all your fault, meow!”

Celes was dumbfounded by what she was being told. “Do you...” she started, her voice barely above a whisper. “Do you really have the cure?”

“I do, yes,” I confirmed.

The second I uttered those words, I saw all the tension instantly leave her body. She had been so worried about her sister for all that time, unsure if she would ever heal from the illness afflicting her... I could only imagine how relieved she felt, knowing I had a treatment for it.

“Celes, we’re gonna need to thrash out the details,” I said to her. “So what do you say? You up for another round of bartering?” I held out my hand for her to shake.

She seemed a little hesitant at first, but she eventually shook my hand. “Thank you, Shiro,” she said, and I fancied I could see the faintest outline of a smile on her lips.



I’d heard both Celes and Eldos singing the praises of the Immortal Dragon’s blood, but I had no idea quite how incredible it was. All the injured adventurers had to do was drink a single drop of the Immortal Dragon’s blood, and boom, they were fighting fit again. Even Ney’s broken arm healed itself! Eldos had told me that the Immortal Dragon’s blood was a key ingredient in making an Elixir, which was supposedly the strongest potion in the world that could heal any ailment, but it looked to me as if the Immortal Dragon’s blood might work just

as well on its own.

The adventurers were all back on their feet by this point, although they clearly weren't in a very good mood, and they were all staring daggers at Celes. I couldn't blame them for that. After all, she *had* beaten them up pretty badly. But all it took was a single sentence for their attitudes to do a full one-eighty.

"Did you want any red magic crystals? I shall give you as many as you want," Celes offered, as reparation for her actions.

The adventurers instantly thrust their hands out toward Celes, smiles on all their faces and seemingly more than ready to leave everything that had happened behind them. While it wasn't anywhere near as impressive as Emille's drastic changes in attitude, I couldn't help but be amazed by this display. Adventurers sure did like money, huh?

So, Suama was safe and sound, none of the adventurers had lost their lives in what had been a fierce battle, and it even seemed like a potential reconciliation between the humes and the demons might be in the offing. All's well that ends well, as they say. Except that it was now time to say goodbye. Suama had turned back into her human form and the poor thing looked on the verge of tears.

"Take care, you hear, Suama? I'll forever be Mommy Shiori," Shiori cooed at the little dragon girl.

Suama nodded. "Ai."

"And you're absolutely *not* allowed to forget about me either, okay, Suama?" Saori said to her next.

"Ai."

The twins wrapped their arms around the little dragon girl and gave her a gentle squeeze.

It was Aina's turn next. "Little Su..." That was all she managed to get out before the tears that had welled up in her eyes started streaming down her face. Her smile didn't falter, however. "I'm so happy I'm your big sister. Be good for your mama, you hear? You have to!"

“Ain-ya!” The little dragon girl threw her arms around Aina and gave her a big hug. Then she beamed at her with tears rolling down her cheeks and said, “Ain-ya, I wike you!”

She turned to the twins next.

“Shi-o-ri, I wike you!”

“Suama...” Shiori mumbled.

“Sha-o-ri, I wike you!”

“Suama!” Saori cried.

The little dragon girl was beaming from ear to ear, looking extremely proud of herself for managing to voice her feelings for the twins and Aina.

Last of all, she ran to me and threw herself into my arms. “Pa-pa!”

I picked her up and put her on my shoulders, because I knew she liked being up there. Happy giggles escaped her lips, and she wrapped her little arms around my head.

“Pa-pa, I wuv you!”

That was enough to cause the dam to burst, and tears started streaming down my cheeks. Suama hadn’t even been with us for one whole month, but it had been long enough for her to become part of the family.

“Take care, Suama,” I said to the little dragon girl. “Live a long and happy life with your mom.”

“Ai!”

She changed back into her dragon form, and just like that, she was gone, soaring away into the night sky with her mother. It was a beautiful sight to behold.

Epilogue

Ten days had passed since we had said our goodbyes to Suama. A lot had happened in those ten days, bringing a certain amount of change to our lives.

First, there was the whole grandma situation. When she showed up to save me from Celes's heat beam, I'd accidentally let slip her true identity to the twins. Grandma had been planning on doing a "surprise" reveal, but I'd say learning the grandma they thought was dead was actually *alive* had been enough of a surprise for the twins as it was. After we went home, they stayed silent for a while, frozen in shock, before throwing themselves into grandma's arms with tears streaming down their faces. And if I also happened to shed a few tears while watching this reunion, that's nobody's business but my own.

I also finally found out what grandma had gone off to investigate. Remember those teleport gates Celes talked about? Well, apparently, they were left over from an ancient civilization, and there were a bunch of them scattered all around the world. And guess who sealed them all. Yup, that's right. It was grandma. She thought they might become a source of conflict between the various nations of the world, so she decided to seal the gates once and for all, and on occasion, she'd go around to make sure the seals were still intact. I had to admit, I was impressed by her commitment. After all, it meant going all the way to the island the demons inhabited just to make sure the teleport gate was still sealed. Now that's what I call dedication. She graciously agreed not to reseal the gate on the demons' island and the one in the Gigheena Forest, so that Celes and the other devils would be able to travel to and from Ninoritch.

Why would that be necessary, you ask? Well, when we got back to town, Karen and Celes had a rather long discussion that resulted not only in the establishment of a formal relationship between Ninoritch and the devils (kind of like how sister towns work) but also in a signed treaty of commerce. Ninoritch would send food to the devils through the teleport gate, and I would provide them with supplements like the one I had given Stella to cure her, plus some other daily necessities. In exchange, the devils would send red magic crystals to

Ninoritch. I'd been told that they were very rare materials that sold for about as much as mithril, but they were so common on the demons' island, they basically had no value there.

Oh, and speaking of the teleport gate, Celes actually took me to the one in the Gigheena Forest so I could check it out for myself. It was about a five-day walk from Ninoritch and was surrounded on all sides by dense forest. There didn't even seem to be an animal trail leading up to it. Saying it was a challenging place to get to was an understatement. This, of course, presented a problem: how exactly was I supposed to send my wares to the devils if there wasn't even a proper path for me to take to get to the gate? Thankfully, I had an idea. I teamed up with Shiori and Saori and the three of us used every last ounce of adorableness we could muster up to persuade grandma to make it easier for me to access the gate. Grandma couldn't resist all the cute looks on the faces of her grandchildren and so she created a path for me to get to the teleport gate, though she did spend the whole time grumbling about how spoiled we were. She parted the trees and dropped a nice layer of stone slabs between them so that we'd have a much easier time getting to the gate. Grandma really could do anything with her magic, huh? I had to hand it to her, she was ridiculously cool.

Thanks to her, we were able to start bartering properly with the demons, and in just a matter of days, we'd gotten an insane amount of red magic crystals. Eldos was probably the one who was the most pleased by this turn of events. It was apparently every dwarven blacksmith's dream to work with them.

"Maybe I should give my old friends a shout. Tell 'em they can have all the red magic crystals they want, no limits," he mused. "They'd jump at the chance, mark my words."

I wondered if this meant all the shelves in the weapon shops of Ninoritch would soon be fit to bursting with weapons and armor made from red magic crystals.

Despite the gaping hole that had been left in all of our hearts, life went on. At that particular moment, I was sitting on a chair in my store (I'd gotten someone in to fix the frontage of the shop and to install a new door, since the last one had been blown to bits by Celes) when Aina came over.

“Mister Shiro, are you looking at the photo again?” the little girl asked me.

I nodded without taking my eyes off the photo in my hand. It was a picture of me, Aina, the twins, and last but not least, Suama. All five of us were throwing double peace signs.



“I wonder how little Su’s doing,” Aina mused, looking at the photo.

“She’s fine. I’m sure she is,” I replied.

“Yeah, you’re right. I’m sure she is,” the little girl repeated in agreement and nodded with a wistful smile on her face.

For a while, neither of us said a word; we simply looked at the picture in silence. But it seemed that a certain someone couldn’t bear the quietness of the room a minute longer.

“Ta-daaah!” All of a sudden, Patty flew out of Aina’s backpack.

“Boss?” I said, bewildered by this display.

The little fairy dived back into Aina’s backpack, then flew out again. “Ta-daaaaaah!”

Aina and I exchanged looks of confusion.

“W-Well? Are you surprised? Did I startle you when I flew out of Aina’s backpack just now?” Patty asked. This was probably another one of her attempts to cheer us up. Ever since we had returned from the forest, the little fairy had been playing silly little pranks like this one in an attempt to make us laugh.

I hummed. “Maybe a little.”

“J-Just a little?” she said sadly, her little shoulders slumping.

“Only kidding. You gave me a hell of a fright,” I said.

“I wasn’t expecting it at all,” Aina agreed.

“R-Really? So I *did* surprise you!” Patty exclaimed, a grin spreading across her face. Then she cleared her throat and gave me a look. “Anyway, weren’t you meant to go to the guild today, Shiro?”

“I am. I have items to deliver.” I’d set up a satellite store in the Fairy’s Blessing guildhall and regularly sold some of my items wholesale there. On this particular day, I was supposed to drop off some preserved food to them.

“I can go instead, Mister Shiro,” Aina said.

“Are you sure?” I asked her.

“Yeah, I...” She hesitated. “I feel like a walk.”

“Is that so? Well then, I might take you up on that offer,” I said.

“Okay!” Aina turned to her fairy friend. “Patty, are you coming with me?”

“Well, if you *insist*, I *guess* I don’t mind tagging along,” the little fairy replied.

I waved the pair of them goodbye as they set off for the guild. Then, almost as soon as the front door had closed, I heard footsteps coming down the stairs.

“Morning, bro,” Saori said, rubbing her eyes as if she had just woken up, which was probably the case.

“Morning? It’s already noon, Saori.”

She groaned sleepily. “I’ve been struggling to sleep recently,” she explained, then let out a big yawn.

“Where’s Shiori-chan?” I asked.

“Still sleeping. Want me to go wake her?”

“Nah, leave her. She’ll get up sooner or later.”

The two of them were still pretty young, so I figured they must have been struggling to come to terms with Suama’s absence even more than I was. They were even losing sleep over it, by the sounds of it.

Saori groaned again, then said, “Nope, can’t do it. I’m going back to bed, bro.”

“What about Beauty Amata?”

“We’ll open when we wake up. Anyway, time for some shut-eye.”

And with that, she padded off back upstairs again.

“Good grief. Those two...” I muttered to myself.

I didn’t blame them, though. After all, everyone was feeling low due to Suama’s absence, and that included me as well.

“I’d love to see her again. I hope that day will come. In fact, I’m sure it will,” I mumbled to myself.

Then all of a sudden, the little bell above the shop door tinkled. I turned and met the eye of an unexpected guest.

"It's been a while, Shiro."

"Celes? What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I came to fulfill my promise, naturally," the demon said.

"Your promise?" I repeated, confused. "What are you talking about?" I racked my brain, trying to figure out what it was she had promised me, but nothing sprang to mind.

"Have you forgotten? Back in the forest, I swore I would become your slave," she answered matter-of-factly.

"*What?!*" I spluttered.

"*Shiro, I beg you. Please instruct the Immortal Dragon to give me some of its blood. In exchange, I shall willingly hand myself over to you and become your devoted slave. My heart, my body, and even my life will be yours to do with as you please.*" Oh, right. I remembered now. That was in fact what she had said.

"But hold on a minute, Celes. It was the medicine I gave you that saved your sister, right? Not the Immortal Dragon's blood," I protested.

"Yes. And as proof of my gratitude, I have sworn to become your slave."

"You said you'd become my..." I faltered slightly. "...my 'slave' if I instructed the Immortal Dragon to give you some of her blood, but I didn't. Which means I didn't hold up my end of the bargain, so you don't have to hold up yours," I argued. "And besides, I already told you to forget all that nonsense about 'slaves' and you said you'd think about it! In fact, your exact words were, 'I'll think about it.'"

"Yes. I did think about it, and this is the conclusion I reached," she stated.

"Are you kidding me?" I muttered under my breath.

"You saved my sister, therefore I must repay you. Is there anything you would like me to do, Shiro? If it is within my power, I swear it shall be done."

I pondered this briefly. "How about 'go home'?" I tried.

“Stop fooling around!” she fumed, grabbing me by the collar.

“Uh, don’t you think you’re acting a little more, um...”—I searched for the right word—“*erratic* than before, Celes? You seem like a completely different person.”

“That is because of you,” she said.

“I’m afraid I don’t follow,” I admitted.

“I spent so long trying to find the Immortal Dragon in order to save my sister, and then it turns out that *you* had the cure to her illness all along. It feels like some sort of cosmic joke. It has left me feeling like it is pointless to take things as seriously as I once did. Can you really blame me?”

“So basically, up until now, you’ve been bottling up all of your emotions, but you’re tired of it, so you’re just letting loose,” I summed up. “Is that it?”

“D-Do you have a problem with that?” she said, her face turning as red as a tomato. It seemed I was on the money. “Wh-Why are you laughing?” she huffed, shooting me an accusatory glare.

“I’m not.”

“Yes, you are!”

“I mean it! I’m not.”

Our silly little exchange went on like this for a little while longer, when all of a sudden, the doorbell tinkled again. Celes still had me by the collar, but I managed to turn my head just enough to see who had walked in. It was a woman, and she was absolutely gorgeous.

“It has been a while,” she said with a smile on her face.

Uh, and you are?

“Celes, I think she’s talking to you,” I said to the demon.

She looked the woman up and down. “I do not know her.”

“But she just said, ‘It has been a while.’”

“I was talking to you, master,” the beautiful woman said.

“Yeah, that’s what I’m saying. You were talking to your...” My brain finally caught up. “Hold on, ‘master’?” I repeated, doing a double take.

“Yes, you, master.”

The woman flashed me a smile. She looked very elegant with her long, flowing white hair that reached all the way down to her hips and her gold-colored eyes. The gentleness of her demeanor reminded me of Stella in a way.

Hold on a minute. She just called me ‘master.’ Does that mean...

The woman nodded, almost as if she had read my mind. “I am the dragon you brought back to life in the forest, master.”

Huh? What the hell is happening here? Why does it feel like I’m in some kind of folktale all of a sudden? Though more importantly, what is she even doing here?

I didn’t have time to put any of these questions to the woman, though, because just at that moment, Aina and Patty rushed back into the shop.

“Mister Shiro! We have a problem! Look!” Aina called over to me.

“Shiro! We have a problem! Look!” Patty repeated almost word for word.

Aina was completely out of breath. I looked at what they were telling me to look at and saw a little girl holding Aina’s hand.

“Pa-pa!”

It was Suama. It seemed our reunion had come sooner than I’d thought.

“Look, Shiro!” Patty said. “I-It’s Suama! She was standing right outside your shop! How’s that for a surprise?”

Footsteps came rushing down the stairs and the twins suddenly burst into the room. Patty’s voice had probably woken them up. They took one look at Suama and grins lit up their faces before the two of them exchanged an excited high five.

“Shiro, I wasn’t done talking to you!” Celes protested.

“Master, would you like me to rid you of this demon?” offered the Immortal Dragon who was masquerading as a beautiful woman.

“Who even are you?” Celes said.

“My, my, don’t you remember me?”

“Mister Shiro! Little Su’s back!” Aina said, trying to grab my attention.

“Shiro, are you surprised? You are, right? Are you more surprised or less surprised than when I did my little prank earlier?” Patty pressed me.

The little dragon girl cooed at me. “Pa-pa!”

“Bro, move! You’re in the way! I can’t see Suama!” Saori complained.

“Suama, it’s Mommy Shiori! How have you been?” My other sister’s entire attention was seemingly on the little dragon girl.

Amid all the chaos, Peace stretched his little body, then curled up into a ball, ready for a nap.

It seemed this day was going to be quite an eventful one.

Afterword

Thank you for purchasing the fourth volume of *Peddler in Another World: I Can Go Back to My World Whenever I Want!* I'm the author, Hiiro Shimotsuki.

First and foremost, I would like to apologize for how long it took for this volume to come out (*kowtows in all directions*)! You see, I have a chronic condition and it worsened recently to the point where I was on the brink of being hospitalized, which is why the publication date of this volume got pushed back. Once again, I am really sorry for this, but there was nothing I could do about it (*smile*).

As ever, here are the acknowledgments:

To Takashi Iwasaki-sensei, thank you for always drawing gorgeous illustrations for this series. And I'm really sorry the publication date of this volume was pushed back!

To Shizuku Akechi-sensei, who is responsible for the manga adaptation of this series, I'm very much looking forward to the next chapter coming out.

To my editor and the whole editorial department of HJ Bunko, thank you for the valuable help you gave me this time as well.

To my family, my friends, and my dogs, thank you for your support.

And the biggest, fattest thank you of all goes to you, the reader, for reading up to this point!

Lastly, I will once again be donating part of the royalties from this book to an association that helps children in Japan. I hope I can help give them the life every child deserves. So by purchasing this book, you are also contributing to giving them that life. I think it would be nice if these children grew up to love stories.

All righty, then. See you all in the next volume!

Hiiro Shimotsuki



**“I have a
question
for you,”**

**the figure said,
pulling their
hood back ever
so slightly.**



“Kyururu...”

The baby dragon
closed its eyes,
purring contentedly.



“And
as your
future
wife, I’d
get to live
in the lap
of luxury,
thanks to
all of the
money
we’d be
squeezing
out of our
vassals,
and—
hmph!”

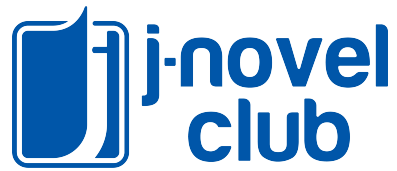
“Yeah,
yeah,
we get
it. Shut
up now,
meow.”











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Peddler in Another World: I Can Go Back Whenever I Want! Volume 4

by Hiiro Shimotsuki

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